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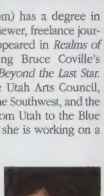
contributors

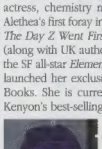
KRIS CHAU is 26 years old and was born and raised on the island of O'ahu. She went to California College of Arts and Crafts for illustration, in Oakland and San Francisco. She now lives in Philly as an illustrator, but she's never had a cheesesteak. She dreams of pretty girls all day and draws until her hand falls asleep.

HAL DUNCAN lives in Glasgow, Scotland, and is a member of the Glasgow Science Fiction Writers Circle. His debut novel, *Vellum*, has just been published by Del Rey Books. *Vellum* is the first in a diptych called THE BOOK OF ALL HOURS which will conclude in 2007 with the publication of Duncan's second novel, *Ink*.

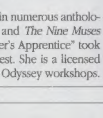
CAITLIN KUHWALD was born in San Diego, California, and graduated from the California College of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco, receiving a BFA in illustration. Since, she has been working as a freelance illustrator and has done illustrations for such clients as *Rolling Stone* magazine, *Spin* magazine, The Criterion Collection, and The Yes Men Corporation. She is currently in graduate school at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.



HUAN TRAN is a pretzel bender, city walker, with comfy sneakers, tunes, and no destination, he can walk forever. Life could use a soundtrack to keep your steps moving to a beat, except Huan walks to a rhythm that can be described as a crab crawl across corduroy beach. He's wandered through two degrees; crossed time zones, equators, meridians, sometimes without the foggiest as to where he's going. You can't be lost or late if you don't have anywhere to be. He likes art, ideas, hates onions and currently runs Leaking Faucet Studio, www.leakingfaucet.com.



SUSAN J. KROUPA (www.susankroupa.com) has a degree in music theory and has worked as a music reviewer, freelance journalist, and librarian. Her short fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy* and various anthologies including Bruce Coville's *Shapeshifters*, *The Bones of the World*, and *Beyond the Last Star*. She has also won literary awards from the Utah Arts Council, Writer's at Work, the Frank Waters Writers of the Southwest, and the Writers of the Future. She recently moved from Utah to the Blue Ridge Mountains in southern Virginia where she is working on a young adult novel.



At a very young age, **ALETHEA KONTIS** made it her life's goal to become the heroine of her own fairy tale, like the ones her father read to her evey night before she went to sleep. A former child actress, chemistry major, and Orson Scott Card Boot Camper, Alethea's first foray into the literary was a picture book: *AlphaOops: The Day Z Went First* (Candlewick Press). In 2005 she co-edited (along with UK author and Knight in Shining Armor Steven Savile) the SF all-star *Elemental: The Tsunami Relief Anthology* for Tor and launched her exclusive dark fantasy and horror small press, Nyx Books. She is currently writing the compendium for Sherrilyn Kenyon's best-selling Dark Hunter universe, and has just finished a young adult paranormal/horror novel of her own. Alethea lives in Tennessee, where she works as a buyer for Ingram Book Company and an editor for *Apex Science Fiction and Horror Digest*. Find out more about Alethea's plans for world domination on her Web site: www.altheakontis.com.

SARAH TOTTON's short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies including *Tesseracts Nine*, *Polyphony 5*, and *The Nine Muses* (Wheatland Press). Her story "The Bone Fisher's Apprentice" took Third Place at the Writers of the Future Contest. She is a licensed veterinarian and a graduate of the Clarion and Odyssey workshops.

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DEALER INQUIRES WELCOME!

By Pesa Nelson

Masters of Horror begins a new bone-chilling season on Showtime this fall.

What would happen if you could round up the best horror movie directors and set them free to create whatever they wanted, no holds barred?

It's already happened. Last fall Showtime launched an original anthology series called *Masters of Horror*, created by director/producer/writer Mick Garris. Each episode is a one-hour "mini-movie," and Season 1 is coming out on DVD as Season 2 cranks up to begin by Halloween.

"We're fans," Garris says about himself and his fellow directors. "We love movies, and there aren't many good horror movies around these days. It's ironic that you have to turn to television to find the stuff with teeth in it."

ABOVE: George Wendt stars in a second season episode entitled "Family," directed by John Landis. RIGHT: The House is a major character in Tobe Hooper's "That Dammed Thing."

Garris is the driving force behind *Masters of Horror*. Best known for directing Stephen King's work (TV's *The Shining*, *Desperation*, and *The Stand*), Garris started out as a rock and roll singer in the 1970s. He was the story editor for Steven Spielberg's *Amazing Stories* TV series in the mid-1980s and wrote nearly a quarter of its episodes. Garris also has published a lot of short fiction, and his first novel, *Development Hell*, was published in June.

So how did he come up with *Masters of Horror*?

As a member of the horror community, Garris often runs into his fellow directors at conventions and festivals, and they'd often talk about getting together socially.

"I realized that nobody was going to organize it if I didn't," Garris says. "So I took it in my hairy paw and organized dinner with a dozen of the genre people I knew, and we had a great time. We did several dinners. And each one had more and more people joining the party. So we started talking about working together.

"I've been wanting to do a real horror anthology for a long time. I don't watch series TV. It doesn't interest me. But it sure would interest me to see movies by all the people who know and understand and love the genre best."

What captured every director's attention was the idea of having the freedom to create work that was uniquely theirs. Typically, when directors work in television or film, they're restricted by ratings requirements and what the executives want them to do. For the first time, they wondered if it was possible to create a project that would throw the idea of ratings out the window and keep executives out of the mix.

"We knew that it couldn't be on network television," Garris says. "If it was for television at all, our choices were HBO or Showtime and DVD."

A DVD company, Anchor Bay and its parent company IDT, were so excited by the idea that they asked Garris how much money he needed and when he could start. With the DVD deal in place, Showtime

Now—pass our free test and . . .

Write for Publication!

By Kathryn Jensen

I guess you'd call me a late bloomer. As a schoolgirl, I was intimidated by any kind of writing assignment. Given a choice between taking an exam and writing a report, I'd always choose the exam.

"I decided to pick up some easy money"

It wasn't until my daughter was born and I was living in a remote village in southern Italy as an American military wife that I was driven to writing. Removed from family and friends, without TV, and desperately short of cash, I decided to pick up some easy money by writing for children's magazines. Or so I thought.

To make a long story short, I was hooked the moment I put pen to paper. I learned a little bit just by writing, but it sure wasn't easy, and I began to collect rejection slips.

Then, while still in Europe, I enrolled in the home study course in children's writing offered by the same people who later developed *Breaking into Print*. I had a great mentor and I learned quickly. While still a student, I sold a story to *Highlights for Children*.

". . . a little piece of time"

Back home, I took my writing with me everywhere—to doctor's and dentist's offices, the playground, anywhere I could grab a little piece of time. While other employees sat in the cafeteria, I sat in my car and wolfed down a sandwich to pick up 40 minutes.

Along the way, I met other writers, joined a critique group, and took absolutely any writing job I could get. It was an exhilarating, challenging, glorious climb. When I had sold five novels, I decided to "come home" and I joined Long Ridge Writers Group as an instructor in its new breakthrough program, *Breaking into Print*, to pass along the lessons I had learned. Since then, many of the students I've taught have been published, and I've written articles, a novella, and 37 more novels.

"The most effective training, by far, is one-on-one mentoring"

In my long climb, I've found that the most effective training for new writers, by far, is one-on-one mentoring. That's one instructor (like me) for each student (like you). You write your heart out and I read every word you write with the clear eye of a constructive critic and the enthusiastic support of a cheerleader. I look for strengths you can build on as well as pitfalls that could slow you down. Don't ever doubt it, I'm on your side all the way from page one to graduation and, with any luck, publication!

"Someone who's not stingy with praise"

Writing for publication takes specific skills, and you can learn them best from a personal mentor . . . someone who's closely involved with your writing, and involved in the way you see and think and feel . . . someone who reads every word you write, makes detailed notations on every page you submit, and writes you meaningful letters of advice and encouragement with every assignment. And someone who's not stingy with praise.

—Kathryn Jensen

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Kathryn Jensen, a Long Ridge Writers Group instructor, is the author of 42 books and many stories and articles. Her latest book, *The Secret of the Red Flume*, an Aladdin Mystery from Simon & Schuster, 2002, appears under the pen name of "K. M. Kimball."

It's tool time for George Wendt in "Family"

then signed up to air *Masters of Horror* as an original series.

Each episode has a different director, who shoots it in 10 days with a $2 million budget. "An average one-hour TV show these days is $2 million or more," Garris says, "but what is not average about ours is that it's all new sets, all new locations, all new actors—there's nothing that you can amortize. We're reinventing the wheel every two weeks."

Once a director signs up for *Masters of Horror*, the options are; choose your own story or ask for one that's already been developed. Whatever path directors choose, they make that story their own.

Season 1 includes episodes by Garris, John Carpenter (*Halloween*), John Landis (*An American Werewolf in London*), and Stuart Gordon (*Re-Animator*). Gordon opted to film one of his favorite short stories: "Dreams in the Witch House" by H.P. Lovecraft.

"This was the very first Lovecraft story I ever read," Gordon says. "I read it when I was a teenager and never forgot it. It's such a strong and scary story."

Lovecraft's story is about a new tenant in a boarding house who discovers a witch's plan to sacrifice his neighbor's baby. "My writing partner, Dennis Paoli, and I had been talking about doing this for years, but every time we got into discussions with studios, as soon as we mentioned the idea of sacrificing a child, that was the end of the discussion. *Masters of Horror* gave us the freedom to do the story, which everyone else had been afraid of.

"My wife, after she saw the episode, was ready to divorce me," Gordon adds, laughing. "She said, 'They're never going to air this,' but they did."

During the first season, there was only one episode that Showtime considered too intense to air. In other words, 12 out of the 13 episodes were aired. The 13th episode was directed by Takashi Miike in Tokyo. "It's a cultural thing," Garris explains. "It's really hard for me to watch. There's a torture scene that's really tough to sit through. But we wanted the broadest definition of horror that we could get, and we wanted it to be international."

Shooting for that broad definition of horror has resulted in a series that has enormous variety. "No two films are alike," Garris says. "You'll go online and see people's reactions, and their favorites and least favorites, and none of the lists match. Somebody will love Tobe Hooper's, somebody else will hate it. Mine is one that is not as overtly horrific as some of the other ones, and so a lot of the horror fans just hated it—and yet, in Europe, it's one of the most popular ones. I just love that there's incredible variety. They're all really good, and none of them act like each other."

In Season 1, Garris filmed one of his own short stories that he adapted as a screenplay 20 years ago but was never able to sell. For Season 2, Garris has joined forces with Clive Barker, who wrote an original treatment specifically for *Masters of Horror*. "Clive and I have worked together a lot in the past," Garris says. "This episode is called 'Valerie on the Stairs,' and it's sort of a ghost story, but it goes in a very different direction than what you'd expect. It's very erotically charged, as you might guess, from Clive Barker. It's very literary. In fact, it's about writers at a retreat for unpublished writers who share their space together, and their imagination, as well. It's a very cool story, and I think it's going to be a really very different episode of *Masters of Horror*."

Gordon also has something special up his sleeve for Season 2. His daughter is a high school English teacher, and every Halloween she asks Gordon to speak to her class. Last year, he decided to read Edgar Allan Poe's

"The Black Cat" to the students. "It scared the crap out of them," Gordon says. Their fear made him realize he had the idea for his next *Masters of Horror* episode.

"We made it about Poe, so it mixes elements of Poe's life with 'The Black Cat,'" Gordon says. "Poe married his 14-year-old cousin, and early in their marriage she developed tuberculosis. She had a beautiful singing voice. She was singing for their guests and all of sudden started spitting up blood. That's in the episode. Poe tries to do everything he can for her, but he's virtually penniless. Only at the end of his life did he make money. This drove him to drink.

"We actually use his story as a basis for the episode, which has never really been filmed as written. There have been many adaptations called 'The Black Cat,' but they have very little to do with Poe's story.

Guinemaster Dario Argento directs 'Pelts' starring Meat Loaf

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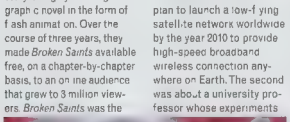
BROKEN SAINTS BREAKS NEW GROUND IN STORYTELLING

In 2001, writer/director Brooke Burgess had a vision. He wanted to tell an epic fantasy/horror story called *Broken Saints*, which explores technology and spirituality. Instead of writing a novel, as he first intended, the story found a unique home on the World-wide Web. With the help of two friends, Burgess stretched the boundaries of storytelling by creating a graphic novel in the form of flash animation. Over the course of three years, they made *Broken Saints* available free, on a chapter-by-chapter basis, to an online audience that grew to 3 million viewers. *Broken Saints* was the



2003 Audience Award Winner in the Sundance Online Film Festival. Now *Broken Saints* is available on a four-disc DVD set from Telefilm Canada, an organization that gave Burgess a $250,000 grant to remaster his epic for DVD.

The story follows four strangers scattered across the globe: a girl on a remote Fiji island, an Arab mercenary in the Middle East, an elderly priest in Japan, and a high tech whiz kid on the Pacific Coast. Each begins having bizarre experiences and visions of the future that send them on a journey of intrigue and mystery.

Burgess's idea for *Broken Saints* came from two real-life news stories that haunted him after he quit his day job and spent six months traveling in the South Pacific. The first news item was Microsoft's plan to launch a low-flying satellite network worldwide by the year 2010 to provide high-speed broadband wireless connection anywhere on Earth. The second was about a university professor whose experiments hook participants up to a device that invokes a sense of God by firing low-frequency electromagnetic fields at specific regions of their brains.

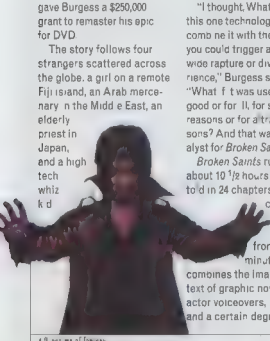
"I thought, What if I take this one technology and combine it with the other—you could trigger a worldwide rapture or divine experience," Burgess says. "What if it was used for good or for ill, for selfish reasons or for altruistic reasons? And that was the catalyst for *Broken Saints*."

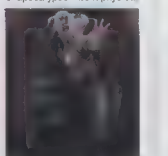
Broken Saints runs for about 10 1/2 hours and is told in 24 chapters, each chapter ranging in length from 9 to 83 minutes. It combines the images and text of graphic novels with actor voiceovers, music, and a certain degree of animation. It's neither a cartoon nor a graphic novel simply translated to film. It's a wholly unique and original form of storytelling.

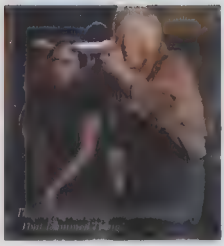
Creating this series meant that Burgess and his friends—Andrew West and Ian Kirby—worked 40 to 60 hours each week for three years without pay. With this kind of commitment, Burgess stuck to his guns in taking the time and thought he believed necessary to create the characters and their journeys.

"This is not a story that begins with a massive explosion and then rewinds two weeks to see how you got there," Burgess says. "It's not a story that's made with any Hollywood clichés. This is a story about humanity but from a profoundly philosophical and personal perspective. These four characters from completely different cultural backgrounds get the same vision about the end of the world and are drawn toward a place in the Pacific Northwest. Somehow, this horrible vision of some kind of apocalypse—be it physical or psychological or spiritual—is tied to these global satellite networks. What people resonate with is that we took our time with these characters to really let you have a window into the idea of, if you suddenly felt that the world just opened up and shined down upon you with a huge, important, powerful, life-altering secret, what would you do and how would you feel when you met others who had the same thing happen to them?"

Resa Nelson







"My old friend Jeff Combs, who starred in *Re-Animator*, will be playing Edgar Allen Poe. It's a part he's been wanting to play for a long time. He looks very much like Poe. He's exactly the same height and build. He even has the same color eyes. I think it was meant to be."

One thing that isn't meant to be—for now, at least—is including episodes based on stories by Stephen King, which is ironic considering how many times Garris has directed King's work. "It can't happen right now," Garris says. "I would love to see that happen, but his short fiction has been committed to the *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* series. Working with Stephen King is the greatest joy anyone could possibly have, but in a way it's kind of nice to have a show that's successful that he's not involved in. I want his involvement, but knowing that can't work out right now, it's OK. It feels like being away from Dad."

Even though no King stories are being adapted, *Masters of Horror* features episodes based on stories or original scripts by luminaries such as Alice Sheldon (as Racoona Sheldon), F. Paul Wilson, David J. Schow, Joe R. Lansdale, Richard Christian Matheson, and Ambrose Bierce, in addition to Barker, Poe, and Lovecraft.

"Basically, everybody goes, 'What would we most like to see and make?'" Garris says. "That's what we're trying to do."

With that kind of approach, it's no surprise that many of the top horror directors in the industry are not only participating in *Masters of Horror*, but coming back for Season 2. In a nutshell, *Masters of Horror* is a dream project for directors. "Nobody's getting rich off of it—none of the directors or writers," Garris says. "They're doing it because they're having a really good time and they're able to flex and nobody gets in their face."

"John Carpenter doesn't ever have to make another movie if he doesn't want to, but he had such a great time that he came back. They've really responded well to it, because they're so unused to working without the ball and chain."

Continued on page 90

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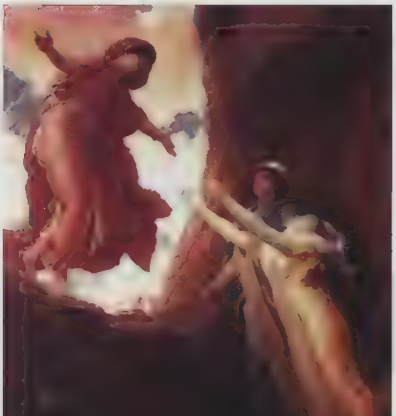
By Nat Duncan

Death and rebirth from world mythology to contemporary magical fiction.



Persephone rises from Hades into the open arms of Demeter, her mother, in Frederic Leighton's The Return of Persephone

To the Cradle from the Grave

In *The Masks of God*, his study of comparative mythology, Joseph Campbell offers a description of Neanderthal burials that implies a strange equation of tomb and womb. Skeletons have been found, he tells us, "interred with supplies (suggesting the idea of another life), accompanied by animal sacrifice (wild ox, bison, and wild goat), with attention to an East-West axis (the path of the sun, which is reborn from the same earth in which the dead are placed), in flexed position (as though within the womb), or in a sleeping posture...." We can't know what stories the Neanderthals told around their fires, but the myths and fictions that survive from written history seem to make similar connections, linking "[s]leep and death, awakening and resurrection, the grave as a return to the mother for rebirth." Indeed, when we talk of our ancestors as cavemen, of their era as the dawn of time, of the birth of humanity, we are constructing our own modern myth, with that cave as grave and cradle, a stony Paleolithic tomb and womb combined. We picture fire within that cave, a symbolic spark of Promethean awareness ("Prometheus," in Greek, is literally "Foresight") We picture, with Plato, humanity huddled round the fire, watching the flicker of light and shadow on the wall, trying to make sense of the shifting suggestions of form

To die is to sleep, the myth seems to be saying, to be entombed among flickering dreams until we wake again. Sleep and death, birth and awakening are fused in tales from across the world, throughout history. There's the Chinese legend of P'an-ku, for example, a primal deity who hatches from the cosmic egg only to die, his breath, his blood, his muscles and veins, all of him, becoming the substance of the world, the wind and the clouds, the strata of rock and earth, the rivers, his death is the birth of the world. There are the metamorphoses of Greek myths—Narcissus, Hyacinth, Daphne—where death is not an end but a transformation to a new life. There are folktales or fantasy stories that take the Hindu or Buddhist concept of reincarnation as a springboard. For instance, Anna Tambour's "Strange Incidents in Foreign Parts," published in *Electric Velocipede #9*, has a protagonist who dies and is reborn as an eggplant. Yes, an eggplant.

An animistic theme informs these tales, a suggestion that death is only a dissolution of the individual back into the collective soul from which he or she came, from which he or she will re-emerge in a new form. We tend to think of the Phoenix as the archetypal symbol of death and resurrection, to talk of rising, Phoenix-like, from the ashes. But the Phoenix that hatches from an egg incubated in fire is not the same Phoenix that builds that pyre of a nest, that dies upon that fire. That Phoenix dies so a new Phoenix can be hatched. If there is a sense of reincarnation, it is not as a restoration of the individual but as what the Buddhists would call a rebecoming.

Against these tales where rebirth is a rebecoming, though, there are tales of resurrection, rebirth as a singular and seminal event, a moment of apotheosis for a unique redeemer figure—Jesus Christ or his fictional analogues, allegories like Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, or derivatives like Neo in *The Matrix*. When we tell the story of the stone rolled away from outside Christ's tomb with a painted

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Master of the Avignon Pietà, c. 1470

egg rolled down a hill at Easter, we make a connection back to that old imagery of the womb and the tomb, that egg, in which a soul (or a symbol of the soul, a bird) is nascent, is rather reminiscent of P'an-Ku or the Phoenix There is more than a hint here surely, in that painted egg, of nature's regeneration, of the dawn with its chorus of birdsong, or the Spring with its gaudy coat of many flowers Note the darkness in the hour of Christ's death, the eternal winter from which Narnia must be saved, even the land is cold and dark dead The hero in these resurrection tales returns with the sun at his back and Summer at his heels, with light and warmth, with fire

The sleeper must awake," Paul Atreides hears during his melange delirium in the film version of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, a delirium that takes him to the verge of death and from which he awakens as a new man, the messianic Muad'Dib Of course the sleeper must awake; in this tale he is the king, the great leader of his people, dead, lost, prophesied or all of the above He's King Arthur in his Avalonian cave, promised to return in Albion's hour of need. He's the great giant Finn MacChuill, the sleeping spirit of Eire who James Joyce sought to stir with the weird words of *Finnegans Wake*. He's the "Head Apollo" Philip K Dick claimed was "about to return" in his endnotes to *Valis*. Maybe even Gandalf, in his return from certain death clad all in white, transformed in the crucible of his battle with the Balrog, has an air of the Anointed One to him

Where tales of death and rebecoming offer a holistic view of a world of ephemeral forms in flux, tales of death and resurrection offer a promise that a hero can survive, that a person of destiny can harrow death, come out the other side. In Christian mythology we have the raising of the dead out of the grave on the Day of Judgment—which is, of course, a tale of death and rebirth in its own right—but these resurrections are more than that. These are tales of heroes, conquerors,

The Virgin Mary holds the dead body of Christ in a pieta, a favorite subject of Renaissance painters The figure of Mary, Mother of God, owes much of her character to Isis and the other mother-goddesses of the ancient world.

individuals who have the power to transcend death

In reality such tales have a dark side

A Deal with Death

I was better than them," mass murderer Charles Starkweather said after a killing spree that left eleven people dead across Nebraska in 1958 later fictionalized in the film *Badlands* "They killed me slowly," said Starkweather, "I killed them quick

On a surface level this seems nothing more than the shadowy cool of the Eternal Villain, as played by Pacino or De Niro, a man without pity, justifying his atrocities with the cold calculus of self-interest. This bogeyman so beloved of Hollywood is a cliché now, instantly recognizable—Alan Rickman as a terrorist, Christopher Walken as a gangster, Rutger Hauer as a hitcher—as a modern myth, in fact, not just a stereotype but an archetype On a surface level we might see nothing more than psychopathy in his lack of empathy But beneath the surface of these murderers the symbolic resonances ring the deeper, richer toll of a tale far older and far truer than any Hollywood schlockbuster. The thrill of the thrillers that they stalk through with impunity—until, that is, the hero or heroine arrives to turn their kingdom of slaughter upside-down—turns on our awareness of what these individuals are, what they represent death

What was missing from the movie of Starkweather's real-life tale, what is all too often absent from fictive representations of the Eternal Villain, is the sense of mystery that makes their menace more than just mundane. Here or there—in the slasher movie, say—the killer is represented as truly demonic (even if his only magical power is the ability to stroll casually and still catch someone running for their life), but in *Badlands* there is no mention at all of the most fascinating element of Starkweather's tale how in the years leading up to his killing spree, the would-be murderer, spending days in the desolate hills around his hometown, had a series of ... experiences where Death, he claimed, came to him in the form of a man with the head of a bear. Death took him down through the flames of Hell, golden flames that were beautiful, that did not hurt at all, and, as in some narrative of fantasy or folklore, struck a deal with him

"They killed me slowly; I killed them quick," Starkweather said, casual as regards his inevitable execution As far as he was concerned he was already dead, had been through Hell, and was now deputized by Death to do his work, to send as many souls his way as possible in exchange for preferential treatment in eternity.

This deal with Death is the same deal offered the vampires of much contemporary fiction—most notably in Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire* or Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*. Underneath the Gothic intrigue and adolescent angst, the repressed sexuality of the vampire's bloodlust, at the core of the modern vampire is the transformative empowerment that comes from acceptance of death, rebirth as a sort of *Homo superior*, a being who, in passing through death and coming out the other side, has moved beyond humanity's fragile mortal state

The appeal of this trope may be, in part, as a compensatory fantasy for the disempowered, the weak, and the weird dissociated from their peers (socially dead) and dreaming of demonic revenge (the rebirth of release), but it would be glib and dismissive to see it as only that. Death is a discrete state; the tales of vampires, the self-mythology of a Starkweather, these are not just stories of the weak become strong but of the dead reborn The psychological state mapped by the metaphoric death should be correspondingly discrete, not simply misery (however profound) but a categorically distinct sense of self "I'm dying here," does not express the same sentiment as "I'm dead "

The rebirth of the vampire as a being of acute senses and even more acute hunger—an overwhelming desire to consume life—gives the clue to the state metaphorized as death in these myths and fictions. Stark weather's, the vampire's, the psychopath's death, each is a death of the soul, a destruction of the ability to care Rebirth is a restoration of desire. In the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, vampirism is rendered explicitly in these terms, when a human becomes a vampire their own soul is destroyed; the demon they become is born from that destruction

Intriguingly, psychologists distinguish schizophrenia into two stages, acute and chronic, the former a state of wild psychosis, visions,

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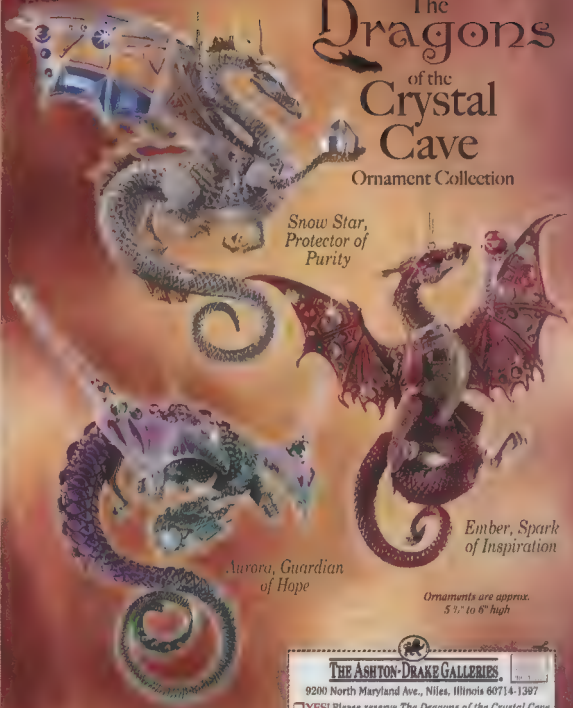

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and voices, the latter a state of cold affectless delusion in which patients often see themselves as dead things. The acute schizophrenic, bounded by demons, might well be seen as the all-too-real psychological truth underlying those heroic descents into the netherworld. We might well be reminded of a Sumerian tale of death and rebirth, that of Dumuzi, doomed and on the run, fleeing the demons sent to drag him down into the netherworld, into his own unconscious. If death is sleep, sleep is psychosis. The chronic schizophrenic, the vampires of legends, the Starkweathers of reality serve as reminders that not everyone returns intact from that dark realm.

But these are stories where the rebirth is incomplete, the human-become-demon may be empowered in its new state but it is not truly restored to life, undead rather than reborn. Such tales illuminate the death and-rebirth motif, but they only tell half of the story. Nevertheless, they're an important reminder of the darkness of the tomb, a warning as we approach the gates of Hell that this journey is no adventure to be taken lightly. The ferryman, Charon, in Greek myth, must be bartered with before he'll take a living being across the river Styx; the living do not belong in Hell.

So Death's minions—the vampires, the psychopaths, the demons—stand at the gates like the three-headed dog Cerberus who blocks the path to Hades, living signs that if we pass we may not ever truly, fully return.

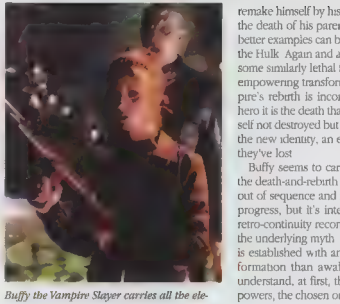
Abandon hope, they say, all ye who enter here.

The Stripping of the Flesh

In "The Descent of Inanna," one of the oldest myths we have of death and rebirth—one with such staying power that modern fantasists such as myself or Catherynne M. Vallente are still drawn to retell it—the Sumerian goddess Inanna, Queen of Heaven, hears the call of the "Great Below" from her throne room in the "Great Above." A feisty, ambitious girl with a string of abandoned lovers behind her and her gaze set on the destiny in front of her, she gathers her objects of power and, on "the road of no return," descends into the Kur, where Ereshkigal, Queen of the Dead, rules a city of dust and ash.

Like the Greek netherworld, Hades, the Kur has its gates—seven of them—and a keeper to warn away the unwary. Inanna gains entrance to this Hell under false pretenses, and as she enters through each gate she is stripped, item by item, of all her symbols of power and royalty until she stands in Ereshkigal's throne room, "naked and bowed low," whereupon she is seized by the Anunnaki, chthonic spirits of the ancestral dead, and scourged, hung on a hook like a wineskin.

The ancestors act similarly on shamans of the Siberian Tungus. Joseph Campbell quotes one such shaman, describing the transformation he underwent after lying sick for an entire year: "My ancestors appeared to me and



Buffy the Vampire Slayer carries all the elements of the death-and-rebirth tale. Her world is a living Hell because she identifies with the demons she is battling.

began to shamanize. They stood me up like a block of wood and shot at me with their bows until I lost consciousness. They cut up my flesh, they separated my bones and counted them, and they ate my flesh raw."

The Greek god Dionysus suffers a similar fate: seized by Titans, torn limb from limb, and boiled in a cauldron to be feasted upon; rescued and restored by his grandmother, Rhea. His epithet Dithyrambus—"Twice-born"—might just as easily relate to this as to the variant tale where his second birth is from Zeus's thigh. The female followers of Dionysus wreak this same savagery upon any beast or man who crosses their path. King Pentheus, in Euripides's *The Bacchae*, spies on their rituals and is ripped apart by his own mother. Orpheus meets the same grim end. While the stories have the latter murdered for preaching against the cult, Robert Graves considered his death a sign that Orpheus represented, originally, the initiate of the Dionysian mysteries, his ordeal a record of ancient rites that sound not unlike the shamanism described by Campbell.

If we want a modern version of this dismemberment and reconstitution, it's tempting to look to the Marvel comics character Wolverine, who, in a hidden base in the wilderness, has his bones removed and replaced with an adamantium skeleton by the unfeeling elders of modern magic—scientists. Surly, cynical, and cigar-smoking, his past life tokened with the doggags of the dead soldier, there's something of the shaman, perhaps, to that suspect and suspicious outsider. It's a fanciful idea, but isn't the superhero the flip-side of the vampire, an archetype of rebirth just as the latter is an archetype of death? With the obvious exception of Superman and a few like souls, superheroes usually have their origin story of being transformed, often by some near death experience. Batman is driven to remake himself by his encounter with death—the death of his parents—at an early age, but better examples can be found in Spiderman or the Hulk. Again and again we see radiation or some similarly lethal force as the cause of the empowering transformation. Where the vampire's rebirth is incomplete, with the superhero it is the death that is incomplete, their old self not destroyed but living on in tension with the new identity, an emblem of the normalcy they've lost.

Buffy seems to carry all these elements of the death-and-rebirth tale. Those elements are out of sequence and revised as the story arcs progress, but it's interesting to see how the retro-continuity reconstructs the story toward the underlying myth. Buffy's superhero status is established with an origin that's less transformation than awakening; we're given to understand, at first, that she is born with her powers, the chosen one of her generation, but is simply unaware of them. Later in the series, however, we learn that these powers are transferred to the new slayer when the old slayer dies (and we learn this, mind, after Buffy herself dies and is brought back to life). Later still we learn that the slayer is herself demonic, when Buffy, in a vision, confronts the ancient elders, the ancestral spirits, who made a deal with the powers of death, binding a demon into the original slayer in a magical ritual. After another death and resurrection we're even shown a Buffy who identifies with the very creatures she hunts, her world a living Hell because she is as dead to it as they are, no longer quite human, no longer capable of emotional engagement.

It is as if the simple set-up of a little girl going face-to-face with the forces of darkness is striving to expand into the old pattern, as if the melodramatics of Buffy's mundane adolescent miseries—of her heartbreaks and hardships—are reaching to become the mythos of Inanna's flesh being stripped from her body—of her harrowing of Hell.

Lamentations

In "The Descent of Inanna," it is only the pleas of her loyal maidservant to the god Enki that lead to her release, Enki sending emissaries to bargain with Ereshkigal for her freedom; they win Ereshkigal's favor with sympathetic laments for the sheer misery of being Queen of the Dead: when she offers them a boon they ask for the corpse of Inanna.

Freedom from Death, though, comes at a cost. Inanna walks out of Hell with demons at her back, following her from town to town as she visits each of her dutifully mourning sons in turn. Finally she arrives in Uruk where her lover, young Dumuzi, lazes under a tree of golden apples, luxuriating in his shining robes. With a hellion wrath Inanna curses the shepherd-boy turned king and the demons pounce; they seize Dumuzi to drag him down to take her place in Hell.

Inanna's tale is possibly less familiar to the reader than the comparable Greek story of

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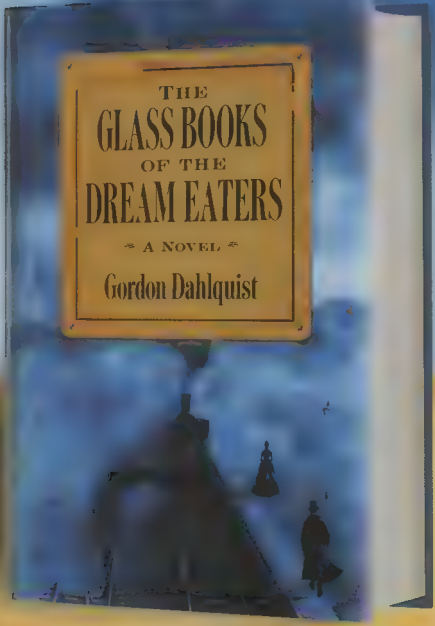

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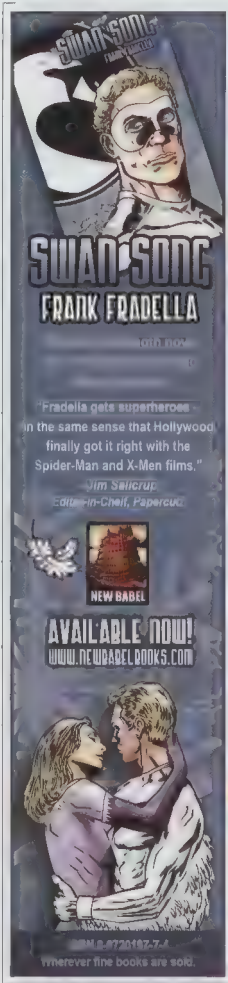

Persephone, abducted by Hades, god of the underworld, to be his wife. Persephone, often referred to as Kore (the Greek term for "maiden"), was so beautiful that Death claimed her for his own, a mythic echo, perhaps, of the sentiment voiced by many attempting to console those who have lost a loved one "before their time."

A less dynamic character than impetuous Inanna, Persephone is the passive victim in this version of the tale, but the differences in the tales only highlight the similarities. Demeter, her mother, is the Earth goddess, whose grief for Persephone is so consuming that the world itself is made desolate, as she refuses to let the grain grow. The loss of Persephone thus brings drought, famine, unending winter; similarly, the absence of Inanna, goddess of the grain store and the date palm, results in an infertile world where "no bull mounted a cow, [no donkey impregnated a jenny]," and much of the Inanna story is taken up with the lamentations of her maid before various gods, bemoaning the desolation.

To the scholars of the Victorian period it seemed obvious that these tales were echoes of ritual sacrifices required for the replenishment of the world: divine blood shed to fertilize the earth—or more abstract articulations of the cycles of nature. We need only look at the Aztec god, Xipe Totec, who died each year and was flayed and found to be gold beneath his skin, like the maize shelled after harvesting. His death was re-enacted in rituals with priests wearing flayed skins of sacrificial victims, touching individuals with defleshed bones to magically impart fertility. To the Victorians it seemed obvious that gods or goddesses die and are reborn because they represent the sun that dies each dusk and is reborn each dawn, or the moon that dies each month and is reborn three days later, or the greenery of the earth that dies each winter and is reborn each spring.

Even before texts were discovered to confirm this, it was assumed that Inanna's lover Dumuzi returned from the netherworld himself on an annual cycle, spending half the year in the netherworld and half the year free, just as his Greek counterpart Adonis spent his summers on earth with Aphrodite before returning to his other lover, Persephone, below. The comparable symbols made the comparable structures obvious, and eventually it was confirmed with the discovery of texts showing that, yes, Dumuzi was indeed reborn.

However, it would be reductionist to take these tales as animistic agricultural allegories and nothing else. One might equally well argue the reverse, that the cosmic action is a metaphor for the human action, that the desolation and regeneration of the earth can just as easily be read as an example of the Pathetic Fallacy, the Romantic device of projecting a mental state onto the external world. It may be a modern error, true, reading these tales of death and rebirth outside of their ancient context, to see the story as more psychological than seasonal, but a major component of these tales is the lament of the living for the dead and, whether voiced by Inanna's maid or Persephone's mother, this could point us toward a more sophisticated reading of these tales as explorations of grief.

We have already mentioned Dumuzi and his flight from the demons of the netherworld. His tale is told in the poem "Dumuzi's Dream," picking up where "The Descent of Inanna" left off, with the demons seizing the gentle shepherd boy to drag him down to the netherworld. It is in the link between the two tales—the demons who shadow Inanna and who become the hellhounds on Dumuzi's trail—that we can see something deeper than a mere allegory of nature and fertility. Those demons, the *ugallu*, are pitiless creatures, fatherless, motherless, they recognize no bonds of family, neither eating nor drinking, they have no appreciation of the joys of life. They are like chronic schizophrenics devoid of affect. They are dead men walking, the Starkweathers of Sumer.

This is where these tales of death and rebirth become personal, psychological, because those demons are, one might say, Inanna's own rage unbound. They are the hatred and resentment of that which still lives. They are grief for the death of one's own soul. They have no emotions because they are the emotions.

The All Great God Is Dead

Plutarch tells a story that, in the reign of Emperor Tiberius, passengers on a ship sailing for Italy from Greece heard a voice com-

FURTHER READING

Joseph Campbell, *The Flight of the Wild Gander* (HarperPerennial, 1969)

Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God, Vol 1: Primitive Mythology* (Penguin, 1959)

The first half of *Vellum* (Del Rey, 2006), "The Lost Deus of Sumer," involves an adaptation of Inanna's story that is partly translation, partly SFnal modernization. Catherynne E. Valente's "The Descent of Inanna" is the first of a series of long-form poems dealing with the "descent into Hell" theme, and retells the Sumerian tale in a way that's wonderfully accessible to a modern audience. For a good, straight translation of the original I recommend Stephanie Daly's *Myth's From Mesopotamia*.

Stephanie Daly, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford University Press, 1989)

Hal Duncan, *Vellum (Del Rey, 2006) Egypt* (George G Harrap & Co, 1915).

Catherynne E. Vallente, "The Descent of Inanna" (Papaveria, 2006)

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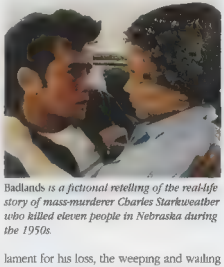
ing from the distant Isle of Paxos, calling on the pilot of the vessel, "Thamus, Thamus, Thamus." This voice went on to tell the pilot that, when they sailed by Palodes, he was to lean out over the side and call three times "Pan is dead, Great Pan is dead." When he did, the story says, the sailor heard a loud lament rise up, the sound not of one voice but many.

To the Christians this story was a symbol of the death of the old pagan gods with the birth of a young Jewish pacifist anarchist who was himself to die eventually on a wooden cross, with nails in his hands and thorns around his head. But the story itself is like the voice from Paxos, faint and distant and perhaps misheard, if the name of the pilot is, as it may be, of more significance than the theologians of the church assumed.

"Tammuz, Tammuz, Tammuz, the all-great god is dead," cried the initiates of a dead and resurrected god of grain and vine, bread and wine, who predates Christ by a few thousand years.

Tammuz is simply the Akkadian name for the Sumerian Dumuzi. In "Dumuzi's Dream," as mentioned, we see this shepherd desperately trying to escape his fate. Like Dionysus trying to escape the Titans, Dumuzi tries shape-shifting, becoming a gazelle at one point, later a snake, but like Dionysus he is eventually captured. As with the stories of Inanna and Persephone, much is made of the



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lament for his loss, the weeping and wailing of his mother and sister in his absence.

Much should be made of these laments, the laments for Tammuz are, like the laments for all such gods, the appeals for his return, appeals that, so the tales say, might just work. Sometimes they do; sometimes they don't. In Norse myth, Baldr, fairest of the gods, loved by all, is protected from all harmful things except the mistletoe. Loki finds out about this weakness and tricks the well meaning but simple-minded Hothr into killing his own brother with a spear made of the stuff. Hel, goddess of the underworld, promises to free Baldr if all objects alive or dead will weep for him, but the refusal of a giantess sours the deal; even so, Baldr will be reborn after Ragnarok, so we are told (just as Finn will wake, Arthur will return, and Christ will have his Second Coming). Tammuz, like Baldr, was so well loved that even in the Old Testament we see the women of Jerusalem wailing for him. Like Christ and Baldr (and unlike Finn and Arthur), Tammuz is an innocent, a god who harms no one, who brings only joy. In one version of the tale, the demons that chase him are soldiers, Tammuz a draft dodger, as much a pacifist as any early Christian.

It's even possible—if speculative—that this same Tammuz is recorded in the New Testament in the form of the apostle Judas Didymos Thomas, who gets two of his names, it seems, from words for twin: the Aramaic *te'oma* and the Greek *didymos*. In Gnostic tales this Thomas is described as the double of the dead and resurrected Christ. Given that Tammuz entered Greek myth as Adonis, son of Myrrha, by way of Phoenicia where he was known simply as Adon, or Adonai, which is to say "Lord," one has to wonder. Is it possible that Tammuz is in fact, to some extent, recorded in the Gospels in their central character, in Christ himself? The family resemblance is remarkable, if we squint our eyes and cock our heads, between the humble shepherd Tammuz, who died at the hands of soldiers, and another Adonai, son of Mary—born on Mithra's birthday, reborn

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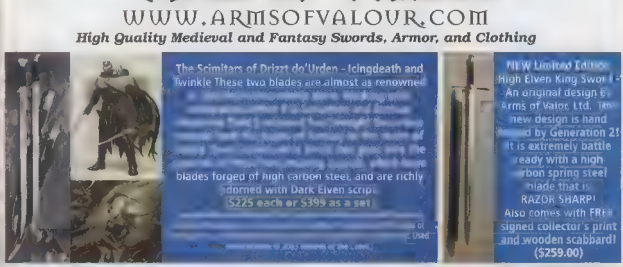
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from death in the spring, just like some ancient deity of fertility. One of the favorite subjects of Renaissance painting, so favored that it earns its own name, the pieta, is the image of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Christ. Fleeing across the Mesopotamian steppe, Dumuzi sobs of how his mother will weep for him.

As has been pointed out by many comparative mythologists, the figure of Mary, Mother of God, owes more than a little of her character, in terms of attributes and epithets, to Isis and the other mother goddesses of the ancient world: "Seat of Wisdom ... Vessel of Honor ... Mystical Rose ... House of Gold ... Gate of Heaven ... Morning Star ... Refuge of Sinners ... Queen of Angels ... Queen of Peace." This is the same Isis, moreover, whose husband, the great god Osiris, is murdered by the evil Set and cast adrift in a coffin, searched for and brought back by Isis only for his body to be hacked into fourteen pieces and scattered. A number of incidents in the story of Isis's search for her husband correspond exactly with the story of Demeter's attempt to find out what has happened to her daughter, Persephone. Intriguingly then, when Osiris was born, according to Lewis Spence, "a loud voice was heard throughout all the world saying, 'The lord of all the earth is born.'" Was that the same voice that announced Pan's death, one wonders?

The women of Jerusalem wailing for Tammuz, the people of Paxos mourning Pan, Isis sobbing for Osiris, Mary cradling the corpse of Christ—in all of these we see grief and the heartbroken hope of moving Death himself to let a lost loved one return. Orpheus pulled it off, after all, descending into Hell and pleading for the return of his Eurydike, with a song that moved the stony heart of Hades, played on the sympathies of Persephone. Eurydike lost the freedom Orpheus won for her on a technicality, but the nature of that technicality is illuminating: Eurydike looked back. In the confused and confusing psychodrama, in this swirling imagery of death and hell, of descent into dreams and delusions, it seems significant that what traps a soul in the underworld is such a simple action clearly redolent of regret.

Is there a secret in these tales of death and rebirth then? That they are not about the dead at all, but about the living, grieving survivors about their descent into a hell of rage and sorrow, about the cold and hollow shock, the desperate dreams and delusions that the dead might return, oh please, that they might just return from that maze of death?

A House of Sorrow

Mark Z. Danielewski, in his *House of Leaves* (Doubleday, 2001) gives us a modern myth of this maze of death, in a text as layered and labyrinthine structurally as it is symbolically. Introduced by an LA waster called Johnny Truant, and footnoted throughout with his own psychological descent, the book purports to be an editing together of scraps found in a trunk which, together, form a book about a nonexistent documentary film telling the story of the exploration of the house of the title. This house, we quickly discover, is larger on the inside than it is on the outside. A door in an exterior wall opens into a long corridor that sits where a flowerbed should be and—in fact, if one looks out of the window beside this door—actually is. The corridor leads down into impossible depths, cavernous spaces.

What makes Danielewski's book a truly resonant work is that his house is not simply a magical realm to be adventured through, with a monstrous tyrant to be slain, a true love to be rescued, a prize to be won. He makes a point of saying there is no minotaur in this maze, this is not a retelling of Theseus's heroic adventure. Instead it is a more somber place. In the end, it is an appendix of letters written to Johnny Truant by his mother from a mental institution that indicate the real character of this house. Disconnected from the narrative, they nevertheless point us to the meaning of that emptiness in the hollow sorrow of the survivor.

The description Danielewski gives of this labyrinth—walls of featureless clay, gray as ash, entirely unlit—bear more than a passing resemblance to descriptions of the netherworld in ancient myths—the house of Ereshkigal, for example, being a dark place

Continued on page 89

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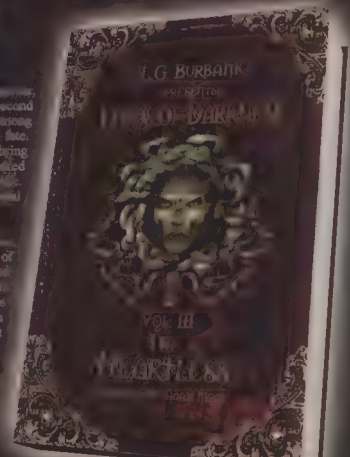

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By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

Enter the Slipstream for a new perspective on the art of the fantastic.

I very much enjoyed ***Feeling Very Strange, The Slipstream Anthology*** (edited by Patrick Kelly and John Kessel, Tachyon Publications, San Francisco, 286 pp., trade paperback; $14.95), not only for its highly entertaining and occasionally quite discomforting stories, but for the game the editors have played with those stories. Not only do they prove there is a brand new genre come amongst us, but they try to definitively define that genre, which has come to be called "slipstream" for lack of something else

I don't think the editors have succeeded in managing to pull off either one of these efforts, but it strikes me as being perfectly OK, not a problem at all, since a core giveaway of this genre, whether or not the thing actually exists, is that conflicting bits and pieces in definitions of it are not only far from signs of failure, but they tend to be part of the proof that you are probably not on the wrong track since the confident and somehow spookily convincing joining together of fundamentally contradictory ideas is one of the strongest signs that what you are reading or writing is, indeed, "slipstream."

Cover art for H.P. Lovecraft's Book of the Supernatural, *edited by Stephen Jones. The cover painting is by John Picacio.*

I suspect John Clute, always a man well worth listening to, is the wisest voice in the editors' very cleverly assembled funhouse of an introduction and in it he presents what I consider a far better name for the genre quoted from remarks of his in *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (which he edited with John Grant) where he simply calls it "fabulation." When you get right down to it, most of the stories in this book bear a strong resemblance to the tall tales of legend running from the romantic high jinks in Valhalla so beloved and so beautifully presented by the spectacular Wagner to the sort of towering folksy whoppers that were first spun in old frontier America about the gigantic lumberman Paul Bunyan and his Babe the Blue Ox and later affectionately preserved by such as the poet Carl Sandburg.

An interesting characteristic of many of the stories in *Feeling Very Strange* is that although almost all of them are enormously highly charged emotionally, they are told by narrators in a carefully soft sort of voice, sometimes almost a whisper. A number of times I found myself almost leaning into the book to hear them better.

Another intriguing effect a good many of the tales have in common is the carefully precise way the events and characters are described. Often the more bizarre and incomprehensible a thing or person or occurrence is, the more meticulously this careful reportage grows. And when it moves into the totally surreal, these attempts to delineate it with the sort of careful accuracy usually reserved for scientific reports only push the mystery encountered that much more deeply into the incomprehensible.

It's really all quite a lot of fun.

I'm not even going to try to pick out favorites. Kelly and Kessel have done a really good job of assembling some of the best authors presently exploring this truly strange area and, just for good measure, their introduction contains a great little list of precursors among which can be found Borges, Verne, Kafka, Leiber, Disch, and Calvino, just in case the reader wants to pursue this intriguing kind of fantastic literature back into the past.

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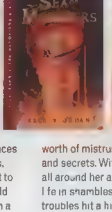
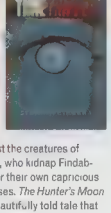




Fly by Night, by Frances Hardinge, HarperCollins, 2006. In a daring attempt to better her life, 12-year-old Mosca Mye joins up with a traveling storyteller/con man and promptly gets caught up in multiple conspiracies involving the powerful guilds that rule her land and the outlawed sect that once held the realm in a grip of terror. In a land where books are strictly controlled, words may be the deadliest weapons of all, though Mosca's homicidal pet goose comes a close second. A superbly written book of wry wit and sly humor, *Fly by Night* is a true joy to read, and a promising debut for a new author.

The Sea of Monsters, by Rick Riordan, Miramax Books, 2006. In this sequel to *The Lightning Thief*, Percy Jackson, demi-god son of Poseidon, is back. With his friends, including a daughter of Athena and a teenage Cyclops, he must once again go on a perilous journey to defy the gods and save the day. Should they fail, their only safe refuge will be gone forever. This is a thoroughly enjoyable continuation of Percy's story, and proof that Riordan is on a roll with the Percy Jackson series.

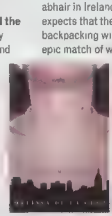
Jennifer Scales and the Messenger of Light, by MaryJanice Davidson and Anthony Alongi, Berkeley Jam, 2006. In the second book of the Jennifer Scales series, the titular heroine continues to cope with her dual legacies as were-dragon and monster-slayer, and finds herself utterly entangled in several generations' worth of mistrust, betrayal, and secrets. With enemies all around her and a social life in shambles, Jennifer's troubles hit a high peak when a mysterious monster starts stalking her family. Now she has to unravel the mysteries of the past before she pays the price for someone else's mistakes. A surprisingly sophisticated tale with a fresh voice, this is worth checking out.

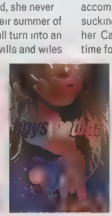
Timetripper Book One: Yestermorrow, by Stefan Petrucha, Razorbill, 2006. Harry Keller sees the world in a way no one else can. Able to both see and affect the threads of peoples' pasts, presents, and futures, he gets caught up in a bizarre time-traveling adventure to save those he knows from horrible fates. But what lies in store for Harry himself? A highly imaginative, sharply written story of trial and error cause and consequence, this is the start of a fascinating series.

The Chronicles of Faerie Book One: The Hunter's Moon, by O.R. Melling, Amulet Books, 2006. When American teenager Gwen goes to visit her cousin Findabhair in Ireland, she never expects that their summer of backpacking will turn into an epic match of wills and wiles against the creatures of Faerie, who kidnap Findabhair for their own capricious purposes. *The Hunter's Moon* is a beautifully told tale that takes full advantage of the depth and variety of Irish legends to start a new and intriguing series.

Blue Bloods, by Melissa de la Cruz, Hyperion, 2006. Schuyler Van Allen's discovery that she's a Blue Blood, part of a secret society of vampires that hides among New York's elite families, changes her life forever. As she comes to terms with her new powers and obligations, she also becomes aware of something stalking her peers. But what could scare a vampire? This start to a new series combines the atmosphere of *Gossip Girls* and *Cruel Intentions* with the seductive mystery of the vampire for an interesting blend.

Boys That Bite by Mari Mancusi, Berkeley Jam, 2006. After being mistaken for her twin sister by the wrong person, Sunshine McDonald begins to undergo the fateful transformation into a vampire. Desperate to stop this process, she goes on a journey to find the Holy Grail, accompanied by the blood-sucking hottie who infected her. Can she save herself in time for prom, or is she destined for a nocturnal existence? This is a great send-up of the usual vampire tale, full of self-aware humor and a keen sense of the absurd when it comes to the usual clichés. It makes a nice change of pace. ❧





I found it all to be hugely entertaining and a very useful and illuminating way to take another look at the glorious art of the fantastic.

H.P. Lovecraft's Book of the Supernatural, edited by Stephen Jones, Pegasus Books, New York, pp., 486 pages; trade paperback, $15.95

In every area of literature there is a tiny little subsection of authors who have exerted a truly astonishing influence over other writers, not just over their contemporaries but also over those in generation after generation to come. One singularly outstanding example of this is Howard Phillips Lovecraft, the strange genius of Providence whose gorgeously bizarre pulp fiction of the twenties and thirties in the last century (first time I've used that "last century" phrase!) worked an enormous spell on his fellow *Weird Tales* regulars and quietly continues to cast its spell over multitudes of authors and artists and movie makers—some of tremendous reputation—to this very day and shows no sign it will not continue to do so over crowds of creators to come.

Critically Lovecraft has done very well in Europe and other foreign lands but in this country he has had a somewhat mixed reaction, in large part, I suspect, because he often goes way over the top the top, but then Edgar Poe often has the same problem and I suspect it all goes back to our Puritan heritage, which we're a long way from shedding. Just look at what a problem Mark Twain had on account of being funny.

One towering god of the American critical establishment, the late, great Edmund Wilson, pursed his lips and shook his head and sighed deeply over the gruesome grandiosity in Lovecraft's fiction but he did give generous and most comradely praise to an essay Lovecraft wrote for a short-lived magazine of the era.

It was called "Supernatural Horror in Literature" and though he first got involved with it primarily as a favor for an editor friend, his craftsmanship and his love for the field took over and he ended up writing a piece over 30,000 words and a golden, fantastically helpful guide to countless lovers of scary tales, myself very much included.

The problem was—back when I was in the process of rumpling and making little splotches with coffee of my Arkham House copy of "Supernatural Horror"—that though a good number of the works mentioned and recommended were reasonably available, some were very, very hard to track down.

But now Stephen Jones has had the wit to do what others should have done quite some time before. A while back it occurred to him and Dave Carson to bring out a book called *H.P. Lovecraft's Book of Horror* which not only contained a complete reprint of Lovecraft's "Supernatural Horror," it was kind and clever enough to present a collection of horror stories that were described and analyzed in that essay.

Now, some nine years later, Jones has gathered up 20 more of the tales also mentioned,

preceded each one with the comments on the story that appeared in H P L.'s essay, and also reprinted another shorter essay of HPL's called "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" so that it might serve as this new book's forward

The collection is, as Peter Straub very rightly says on the cover blurb, "pure gold." All the stories in the book, from its longest (Henry James "The Turn of the Screw") to its shortest (Lafcadio Hearn's "The Hands of Karma"), are as good as this kind of writing gets. If you like horror stories and haven't read "The Yellow Wall Paper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, or "The Voice in the Night" by William Hope Hodgson or "The Red Lodge" by H R. Wakefield, for instance, you are tragically deprived And wait until you read "The Dead Smile" by F Marion Crawford and "Novel of the White Powder" by Arthur Machen!

As a considerable bonus you'll get to see Randy Broecker having all kinds of fun illustrating these gems

A word of warning the Lovecraft comments from "Supernatural Horror" preceding each story are all excellent, but I'd suggest you skip them until you've read the tale itself as H P L., in going over the subtleties of the works, now and then gives away a nasty little surprise or two lurking in the following text

The Line Between, by Peter S Beagle, Tachyon Publications, San Francisco, 231 pp., trade paperback. $14 95

Here is a sweet new book by Peter containing a wide variety of works all of which I found elegant and enchanting, just as fairy stories ought to be

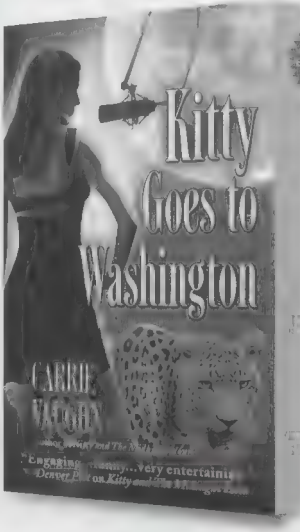
The collection starts with a highly satisfactory sequel to his *The Last Unicorn* called "Two Hearts." In an honest little foreword he admits he only wrote it because his business manager prodded him into doing it so it would help sell an audio book on the first novel

It's a simple but solid little story that introduces an excellent little heroine called Sooz who has so pleased Beagle that he now intends to write a novel all about her and I, for one, am looking forward to reading it

Next in the book are four fables the form and feel of which the author admit are three sources I profoundly respect and admire. George Ade's droll *Fables in Slang*, James Thurber's wry and lovely *Fables for Our Time* and Don Marquis's breathtaking and altogether superb tales of *archy and mehitabel*, no caps on purpose. If you haven't read any of these, by the way, they are very much worth tracking down

News from the author of *Kitty and The Midnight Hour*

SHE'S AMERICA'S FAVORITE WEREWOLF. AND SHE'S GONNA HAVE THE DIRTY POLITICIANS FOR LUNCH.



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Library Journal

"Vaughn's clever new take on the supernatural is edgy and irreverent."
Romantic Times BOOKclub magazine

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All four fables follow the featured animals as the main persona in the grand tradition and all four concern themselves primarily with the universal problem of stupidity. I enjoyed them all but preferred the first and shortest one which is about moths' fatal attraction to flames because it has a nice jauntiness for all its futility.

The book closes with five highly varied short stories, every one of them meaty, touching, and highly entertaining in one way or another. The last one in the book, "A Dance for Emilia," is deeply touching and from the heart but I think my personal favorite would be a very nice Sherlockian pastiche called "Mr Sigerson," a name known to anyone at all familiar with the Baker Street Canon, and it features a very well drawn Holmes who is forced to deal with an altogether different sort of Watson, namely one who doesn't really care for the Great Man at all, though he does melt a little toward the end. Beagle says in his foreword to it that he is particularly proud of this little story and he deserves to be

The Tough Guide to Fantasyland by Diana Wynne Jones, Penguin Group, New York, 234 pp., trade paperback, $9.99

For some horrible reason I have never come across this sharp edged little gem before, but this is apparently a new and revised edition of what the publishers call, and probably with good reason, a "cult classic." Actually, I'm happy to join the cult

Vintage Blood and Fly Spray Vampires
Author, A.B. Wallace
ISBN 0-9765833-0
"If the rest of the series turns out to be as good as this beginning, then we are in for a special treat. The book begins at the best possible time - in the middle of a big problem. Therefore, it will capture your attention almost immediately and holds your fascination until the climatic ending. Author A.B. Wallace is one to keep your eyes on! BRAVA!"
Detra Fitch, Huntress Reviews
"The setting is incredible as readers will accept the ABCs of Wallace World"...Fantasy fans will want to read this delightful tale featuring a wonderful brave woman trying to do the right thing yet keep her vintage blood flowing inside her arteries and veins."
Harriet Klausner, Alternative Worlds
Author Website - www.abwallace.com

The book is just what its title says it is- a guide to the whole world of the conventional *New York Times* best-selling fantasy novels and it is devastatingly complete with maps, lists, alphabetical entrees with cross references, and a whole bunch of cute little Identification Symbols indicating basic categories such as Armor, Animal Skins, and Anglo-Saxon Cossacks, just to give a few "A" examples

The thing's not only a hilarious entertainment, but I would say it is also absolute must reading for anyone out there who is seriously thinking of taking on the job of trying to write such a novel since it mercilessly, yet lovingly, examines and reveals all the clichés. "It is always a stew," as Neil Gaiman points out in an approving blurb possibly in reference to a highly accurate boxed insert which I'm happy to partially quote to give you a feel of this superbly researched volume

WHAT TO ORDER AT AN INN

The short answer is Nothing When you arrive, the innkeeper will bustle out and offer to show you to your Chamber at once. He will assume you will then come downstairs to the Taproom where you will be served with Beer and Stew and, possibly, some bread. It is no good saying that you don't like beer and would rather have milk Inns do not stock milk

There's a nice little section on Trees with a special warning against root dwellers; an informative entry on Secret Passages (including Sewers) that refers you to another one on Underground Passages; a fact packed paragraph on Old Ruined Cities and a really swell guide to the basics of Hovels, just to randomly name a few bits of the kind of valuable information this book's packed with. Also there is a highly intriguing list of other Tough Guides at the front of the book, the last two entries of which are: *The Tough Guide to the End of the World* (coming soon) and *The Tough Guide to Black Holes* (unaccountably missing), but of course that might be some kind of a joke

—Gahan Wilson

Firebird, R. Garcia Y Robertson, Tor, New York, hardcover, 320 pp $33.95, ISBN 0-765-31356-1

In *Firebird*, Garcia Y Robertson comes tantalizingly close to a masterpiece. It is one of those increasingly common fantasies, like Paul Park's *A Princess of Roumania* and China Miéville's forthcoming *Un Lun Dun*, that seems written to appeal to both young adult (YA) and adult audiences. Whether this trend is driven by publishers seeking to capitalize on the surprising popularity of YA novels with adult readers or, on the contrary, by writers eager to tap into a large and sophisticated new audience, one open in many ways to more idiosyncratic works of fantasy than is the traditional adult readership, it's one of the most heartening developments in fantasy publishing in a long, long time.

Firebird is a delightfully droll, impressively inventive, and unapologetically lustful picaresque romp through a medieval-era Rus-

sia, called Muscovy, whose vast forests are inhabited by witches and werewolves and whose feudal rulers are so absorbed in a bloodthirsty struggle for power that they ignore the Tartar threat creeping across their borders until it is too late. Garcia Y Robertson's Tartars are a technologically sophisticated steam-punky civilization able to run roughshod over their less advanced neighbors. An even more advanced group of people, who call themselves gods and possess a technology indistinguishable from magic, intervenes in the affairs of Muscovites and Tartars for mysterious reasons of their own.

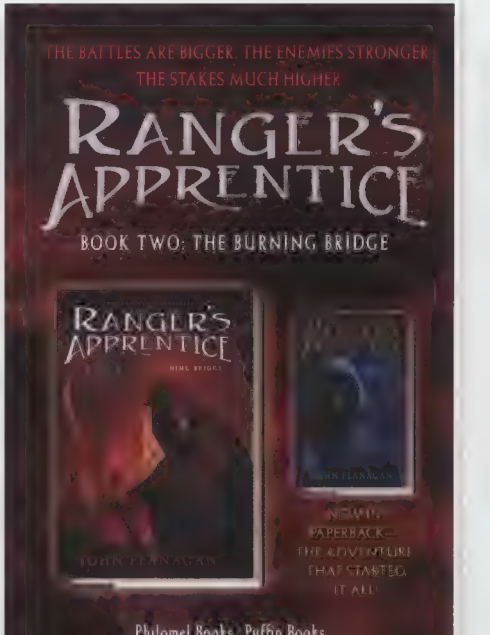
Aria, an orphan girl who serves the feared Bone Witch "deep in the north woods that circle the world," is out gathering fungus one day when she comes upon a wounded French knight, Sir Roye de Roye, burying something in the woods. It will spoil nothing to reveal that this object is the last egg of the all-but-extinct Firebird, the fate of which will determine the fate of all Muscovy. Aria takes the handsome knight under her protection, falling immediately in love with him, and by doing so sets off a chain of events that will propel her and her knight (who falls in love with her almost as quickly) on a series of ever-wilder adventures across a political, geographical, and technological landscape that is as full of surprises for modern readers as it is for the two young lovers—who are lovers in name only, as circumstances continually thwart their desire for each other.

Some chapters have previously appeared as short stories, and while novels thus patched together can be awkward affairs, here the episodic nature of the tale is perfectly suited to such an approach. Aria is a wonderful character: brave, intelligent, resourceful, charmingly naive, and sexually curious. Sir Roye de Roye is almost equally appealing. Garcia Y Robertson's open approach to his characters' sexuality is unusual given Aria's age and the YA characteristics of the novel, but I found its frank, nonjudgmental carnality quite refreshing. There is inevitably a farcical aspect to it as in *Tom Jones*, but it is ultimately a celebration of youthful exuberance and of life itself. I kept imagining what the great Japanese director Miyazaki would make of this rich material.

Only in the closing paragraphs does Garcia Y Robertson stumble—and then he takes a very bad fall indeed. For incomprehensible reasons, he tacks on an explicit and didactic moral, one that forces a contemporary political connection totally at odds with the tone and spirit of all that has gone before. In the process, he betrays both his novel and his readers, doing violence to the former and preaching to the latter. *Firebird* is a remarkable achievement; it could have been a masterpiece, if only its author had had the sense to shut up and stay out of the way.

The Silver Bough, Lisa Tuttle, Bantam Spectra, New York, hardcover, 346 pp, $22.00, ISBN: 0-553-38397-7

The Silver Bough, the latest novel from John Campbell Award-winning author Lisa Tuttle belongs to that branch of fantasy which consists of the working out of an ancient curse or prophecy or spell. The novel is set in the small town Appleton, Scotland, and involves three American women—young Ashley Kaldis, the granddaughter of Euphemia MacFarlane, an Appleton resident who came to America in 1950 under mysterious circumstances; Kathleen Mullaroy, the town's new librarian, who worries half-seriously about becoming an old maid; and Eleanor Westray, known as Nell, a young widow who owns an old mansion, the Orchard House, that formerly belonged to the leading family of Appleton, the Walls. There are also three men: a possibly sinister stranger who bears an uncanny resemblance to the Lohan Wall of 1950, who had been engaged to marry Euphemia and vanished shortly after she did; Mario, a young man sent from Italy to work in his uncle's chip shop after an unhappy love affair with one of his teachers; a married



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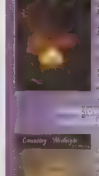

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woman, and Dave Varney, a widower and former rock star.

The sorting out of these three couples takes place amid a gradual blurring of the boundaries between the real world and the realm of Faerie following an earthquake that cuts Appleton off from the rest of Scotland. Thus isolated, the fate of Appleton hinges on the enactment of an ancient legend and custom involving a type of apple unique to the town, Appleton's Fairest: "When a golden apple appears, it's as if all the magic of this land is concentrated in it. The woman and the man who share it can have whatever they desire most—no matter how impossible the wish might seem."

This type of story—one of my favorite examples is the classic 1935 romantic comedy *The Ghost Goes West*—is a kind of puzzle whose scattered and hidden pieces must be found and put together in a certain way, or in a certain order, at which point the magical engine is engaged and whatever it was originally designed to accomplish comes to pass with all the inevitability of fate or physical law, frequently in an unexpected way, and frequently despite the efforts of characters to avoid exactly what ultimately transpires.

The similarity to mysteries is obvious, and in fact stories of this kind employ many of the tropes of mystery fiction. As in mysteries, the process of detecting and assembling clues, or some analog thereof (such as performing the steps of a ritual or gathering the parts of an artifact), is identical to the plot of the novel itself, and the characters of the novel, however skillfully brought to life, are basically no more than puzzle pieces themselves, who also must be placed into a precise mutual arrangement before the magical circuit is completed.

The trick to executing this manipulation in a satisfying manner is to camouflage a cold, almost mathematical rigor beneath a diverting human exterior, one composed of engaging characters (a few eccentrics generally among them), romantic entanglements, an interesting setting either exotic in itself or with a curious history, and a healthy dose of menace. If the author fails to do this with sufficient skill, the inner workings of the engine will be exposed, and readers are apt to detect and resent the manipulation of characters and events toward a preordained ending, regardless of whether that ending is tragic or happy.

The Silver Bough is filled with fascinating folklore, is populated with an array of sympathetic characters in a setting steeped in magic, mystery, and romance, and is gracefully written to boot. What's missing is chaos, real darkness, the chance for events and characters in the book, and even the book itself, to spin wildly out of control. Tuttle pulls back from a full encounter with the unpredictable world of Faerie, she gives us glimpses, some quite eerie, but in the end she settles for the fantasy equivalent of that subgenre of mystery fiction known as the "cozy." Because of this, by the novel's halfway point or slightly after, one begins to hear gears clicking into place, the snap of pieces fitting together, as the engine she has painstakingly assembled performs its function with a speed and efficiency more admirable in a machine than in a work of fiction.

Shuteye for the Timebroker, Paul Di Filippo, Thunder's Mouth Press, New York, trade paperback, 312 pp. $15.95, ISBN: 1-56025-817-9

Paul Di Filippo is one of the most astute critics writing about speculative fiction today. He is also one of the most knowledgeable and encyclopedic readers in the field—it sometimes seems as if there is no novel or short story, however obscure, that he has not read and, as much Borg as Borges, assimilated. Add to that his prodigious gifts as a fiction writer, which include a playfully anarchic imagination, a virtuoso facility with ideas that hearkens back to such past masters of "crap art" as Dick, Lafferty, and Zelazny, and a knack for satire that gives his humorous stories a dark bite and his darker stones a humorous undercurrent.

Di Filippo's latest collection showcases all these virtues. His stories are worthy entertainments first and foremost, but because they are written by someone who is hyperconscious of his predecessors, they reference other stones and writers in subtle and interesting ways, and they are also, without being didactic about it, literary critiques.

In "Walking the Great Road," a writer encounters a story so full of life—"that damned, wonderful story!"—that it makes any future writing or reading impossible and raises the problem of how to spend his remaining years: a problem unexpectedly resolved when he discovers a wall, and in that wall a gate, and through that gate a road that stretches on seemingly forever. "Shadowboxer" is about a man with the ability to kill with a thought, at any distance, and how the U.S. government uses or abuses him as a weapon in the War on Terror. The title story is set in a future where sleep has been eliminated and humanity freed from the slavery of a 24-hour day, giving rise to brokers who trade time like any other commodity. "The Days of Other Light," based on a fragment by Edgar Allen Poe, launches Poe's claustrophobic sensibility and febrile imagination into deep space.

The high point of the collection is a group of vignettes based on—and originally written to accompany—the surreal art of Todd Schorr (one of whose eye-popping paintings graces the cover of the book). These 12 short-shorts are perfect gems of inspired weirdness and demented wit as Di Filippo ransacks popular culture to create a verbal equivalent to Schorr's hyperactive, hallucinogenic art. ❧

shinigami:

to bypass nihilism, a spirit that collects the souls of the dead

A

[illegible]

[illegible] breakers are forced to join the Carcie Breakers

[illegible]ing their rule

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"Sex and chocolate," Eva said wistfully. "That's what I miss the most The darker the better, so dark it's almost black."

"The sex or the chocolate?" I asked, and Eva shrieked with laughter—though I noticed she didn't answer She swooshed through a planter full of geraniums and nasturtiums, and they trembled in her wake Eva was a bit of a minx back in the old days, and she still likes to play the part a bit now.

We were outside the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory, a little faux chalet-style shop in a series of faux chalet-style shops along Highway 101 in Lincoln City, Oregon We usually migrated south for the winter, and this wasn't the first time that we'd ended up in Lincoln City in late October. It's as good a place as any for old lady ghosts to hang out if you don't have any place to go, which we didn't

We'd been playing the Game all day, but in spite of the mild weather, there weren't many tourists and it'd been kind of slow. Eva was ahead 13 to 11.

"Live ones coming at 'cha," Eva hissed. Sure enough, a middle-aged couple stepped out of the Christmas Store (now *that* was a place Eva could turn into a little shop of horrors, given that it held approximately 200,000 breakable ornaments and Eva loved nothing better than to swish around and create drafts—I'd been doing my best to keep her out of there all day) and were headed straight for the candy store next door.

"Married or not?" Eva asked

Marriage Game

Ever eavesdrop on the couple at the next table? This is way more fun...

By Susan J. Kroupa

Illustration by John Singer

"Married," I said from the way the woman was walking three strides in front of the man, and, from the expression on her face—"And fighting."

The woman stopped in front of the candy shop, sent a quick, furtive glance back at the man, and then stared at the door, as if going inside might be a life-changing decision.

"A chocolate store," she said when the man came up beside her Fifty-ish, blonde Republican hair. Tight jeans, loose T shirt. Big brown leather purse with a shoulder strap I debated about Botox She stared at a Halloween display in the window—all the clichés, of course· a scarecrow, a neon orange jack-o-lantern filled with boxes of Rocky Mountain Fudge, Thin Mints, and Mocha Delight. No ghosts, which kind of ticked me off, except they always get the ghosts wrong anyway. "I'd like to see what they have," she said, sounding like she was making a point in an argument.

The man replied, "How's your weight doing?"

"That's harsh," I said. "He's got to be a husband. One point for me."

Eva flitted in front of the man, tickling his scalp where his hair was thinning so that he swatted his head, and then blinked in puzzlement. Almost six feet tall. A little paunch over his belt (so who're you calling heavy, Mr. Calorie Tsar?) Thinning dark hair. Tan. A face on the good side of handsome when he wasn't scowling, which I suspected wasn't often. He wore (what else?) Dockers, boat shoes, and a print short sleeved shirt that was open at the throat

I floated over to the woman and said, "Tell him it's doing just fine, thank you."

"It's doing just fine, thank you," the woman snapped, flinging open the door to the shop. I shot Eva a triumphant look. We always get two points if we can get an F 'n' B—flesh and bone—person to say something. I was up by one point.

Eva and I hurried inside with her. One of the rules we'd decided upon for the Game was that we could only enter a building if accompanied by an F 'n' B.

The man hesitated and then called, "I'll be out here, Helen. Don't be too long." He rubbed a hand over his head. "I think there might be mosquitoes."

"*Chocolate!*" breathed Eva, as soon as we were inside. "I can almost remember the smell."

"Better than you can remember sex?" I asked.

She gave me that smile that was always half smirk. "Why does everything always have to be a competition?"

The shop was long and narrow—not over eight feet wide from the outside wall to the glass display—and on two levels, as if the second part had been an add-on. The section to the left of the entrance was several steps higher. There, behind the display cases, was a marble table where the fudge was made.

Eva floated up toward the bar lights on the ceiling. "How long until the Calorie Tsar makes it into the shop?" she said.

I turned to see if he was still standing outside and jumped—well fluttered—to see, just off to the right of the entrance, an enormous "OK," I said, and fluttered close to the Calorie Tsar, aka Morris, and said in his ear, "She can meet you back at the motel."

Morris didn't bite at first. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, glanced around the shop without his eyes actually focusing on anything, and looked at his watch three times in twenty seconds.

It's true that it's really hard for humans to hear us, given that our matter is so slight that we really can't get the sound waves moving much—or at least that's what some old codger told me shortly after, as he'd put it, I'd "passed to the other side" (which made me feel like I was some kind of gas, but then I guess that's not too far off after all).

"SHE CAN MEET YOU BACK AT THE MOTEL!" I shouted.

He cleared his throat. "Maybe I'll go on back to the motel," he said finally. "You can meet me there."

Helen was still staring at the truffles. "OK," she said absently, and I would have thought the marriage was doomed except for the look of surprise and hurt on Morris's face as he turned to walk out the door.

I never should have agreed to the deal about the pieces—not with Helen staring at the truffles like they were the bread of salvation and Morris's remark about her weight, which every woman knows just makes the chocolate that much more necessary.

Eva hovered near Helen, staring into her face as Helen stared at the chocolates. "You know," she said, "back when I was flesh and bone, some magazine did a survey asking women how they

Helen left the truffles, walked up the two steps to the fudge display, and looked down on the milk chocolate fudge. She bit her lip, twisted her hands together, and glanced back at the door. You'd have thought her future was at stake, and maybe it was.

stuffed bear with a Jackie Gleason belly and an "I can't believe I ate the whole thing" expression on his face. "Three and a half minutes. Have you seen Bubba here?" I asked, pointing to the bear.

But just then a woman rushed in through a door behind the marble slab table, tying on a yellow apron that had the words "Wake up and Taste the Chocolate" embroidered in letters made from little brown hearts. She looked as if she took that advice regularly. She could have been Bubba's body twin.

"May I help you?" she asked Helen.

"If only you could!" moaned Eva, directly over the display case now and staring forlornly at the dark chocolate almond bark.

Helen smoothed her hands over her hips—probably remembering her husband's remark about her weight—and asked, "Is that chocolate coffee melt good?" She pointed to what looked like some dark chocolate truffles.

"A dark chocolate fan," crowed Eva. "Two points for me."

"You didn't call that," I argued. The door swung open and Helen's husband entered just as Bubba-Clone said, "Delicious. We make them here ourselves."

Helen hesitated, more from the Calorie Tsar's presence I thought than from any indecision about the chocolate itself.

Bubba-Clone nodded to Helen's husband and said "May I help you?" with exactly the same intonation she'd used with Helen.

The husband bent his head toward Helen. "I'm with her," he said. And then, in a more impatient voice, to his wife, "Are you ready yet?"

"It all looks so good . . ." Helen's voice trailed off. "Morris, do you want anything? They have milk chocolate fudge."

"We're going to be meeting the Cunninghams at six," he said heavily. "We'll spoil our appetite."

"Four points if you can get him out of the shop," Eva said, "and I get a point for every piece Helen buys."

felt about all sorts of things, and they found that something like sixty percent of their female readers said that they preferred chocolate to sex."

"It'd have to be great chocolate," I said. It hadn't been so long since I'd been F 'n' B myself.

"See for yourself." Eva pointed at Helen. "She's trying a sample."

It was true. Bubba-Clone reached into the case and pulled out one of the chocolate coffee melts. She handed it to Helen.

Helen lifted the truffle to her mouth and bit off a small piece, while Eva and I watched. If we'd had saliva, we would have been drooling. She chewed it slowly, rolling it around the inside of her mouth, her eyes half closed, and when she swallowed it and licked her lips, both of us sighed.

"*See?*" hissed Eva. "I think I should get five points."

"I'd give up a million points to be able to taste that truffle," I said, and Eva muttered an agreement.

Helen finished the piece and ended up buying a *pound* of the chocolate coffee melt, which was like twenty pieces, two dark chocolate almond cluster patties, and two pieces of divinity.

"The fudge only counts as one piece," I said. Helen's purchase having made me terminally behind in the Game.

"Anything else?" Bubba-Clone asked.

Helen left the truffles, walked up the two steps to the fudge display, and looked down on the milk chocolate fudge. She bit her lip, twisted her hands together, and glanced back at the door. You'd have thought her future was at stake, and maybe it was.

Bubba-Clone drummed her fingers on the top of the glass display case, then caught herself and stopped.

"Yeah," Helen said finally. "Give me a half-pound of the milk chocolate fudge."

"Milk chocolate," Eva groaned. "Adding milk to chocolate is like adding water to the milk you use on your morning cereal."

"She's buying it for Morris," I said, not surprised that Eva had missed the point—she wasn't one for subtle takes on people—whether ghosts or the F 'n' Bs.

Eva shook her head. "It figures—he's milk and she's dark—can this marriage be saved? *Fifty* points to you if Morris acts the least bit grateful."

Helen paid for the candy, stopped, and asked for another bag. Then she divided the coffee melts. She left half of them in the bag with the fudge and shoved the other half down in bottom recesses of her purse. "Secret stash," I said. "I don't think the truffles in the secret stash should count."

Eva didn't like that idea at all. "We agreed on the number bought," she sniffed. "Not the number that she shows to Morris. Anyway, every woman needs an emergency supply."

There was no way I could win the Game, I thought. Not unless I could give Morris a personality change and get him to suddenly be grateful for chocolates he didn't want in the first place. Then I remembered how hurt he'd looked before he'd left the shop. Maybe he had a soft spot in him and he wasn't the controlling jerk that he appeared to be.

Maybe … I was way too old for such romantic delusions. Grow up, I told myself. Maybe the best part of Helen's day was a good piece of chocolate.

We followed Helen back toward the motel, mostly because it was getting windy and rumbling clouds were stacking up over the ocean. A cold night ahead and we still had nowhere to stay. Anyway, I wanted to take the long shot on the fifty points.

"Fifty points to me if he doesn't like the chocolate," Eva said as we floated alongside Helen.

"No way," I said. "You didn't set it up."

The houses in the area all seemed to be rentals. Nothing in the haunted market, of course. There never was except for the fabulously rich.

We passed several signs about sneaker waves along the way, and when Helen stopped to read one, Eva and I crowded over her shoulder to do the same. One of the peculiarities of the Oregon coast (according to this sign) was that these giant waves can form and strike without warning. "Never turn your back on a wave," the sign commanded. I wasn't sure how much healthier *facing* a sneaker wave was going to be for an F 'n' B person, unless they were able to run like hell when they saw one coming.

"Divorce him," Eva said into Helen's ear when she'd turned from the sign and resumed walking toward the motel.

"Eva!" I was shocked. "You know we're not allowed. It's interference."

"The Game is interference," she said, but she knew as well as I did that we were supposed to confine our activities to minor things and there's nothing minor about divorce.

Helen and Morris were staying at Western Cliffs Motel, a cement rectangle right on the beach, with bright blue doors and sandy stairs, that was about two blocks north of the candy store. We followed her up a set of weathered steps right up to room 207. Just before Helen entered the room, Eva swooshed up to her and said, "Divorce him" again in her ear.

"Eva!" I said, getting genuinely angry. "You've got to stop."

"I can't help it," Eva said, in a pout. "He reminds me of my ex-husband."

True, at that exact moment, Morris looked like everyone's ex-husband. He was sprawled on the bed, clad in a T-shirt and paisley boxer shorts, ghost-white skin dimpled with curly black hair on his legs, big toe protruding on each of his dark socks. He didn't say anything to Helen as she came in and dropped the bag of chocolates beside him.

Eva said, "We could stay here tonight."

"Where?" I surveyed the room. Small. King-sized bed. Your average middle class place—no roaches in the shower or peeling wallpaper, but paper cups, a small TV and just enough space to move around the bed without hitting the walls. "In the shower?"

"I got you some fudge," Helen said, in a hesitant voice, as though testing the waters. "For after dinner, maybe."

Morris sighed, his eyes on the textured ceiling of the room.

"He didn't thank her," Eva said.

"She noticed," I said, for Helen's eyes had filled with tears. She turned and hurried to the door, as if the oxygen supply in the room was suddenly insufficient. Eva and I barely made it through before she slammed the door behind her.

"Where's she going?" Eva asked as Helen stomped down the stairs.

"I don't know," I said.

Helen was crying in earnest now. She ran toward the beach, stopping when she got to the wet, hard-packed sand just ahead of the waterline. Over the roar of the waves and the plaintive calling of the gulls, we could her sobbing in big, gasping breaths, staring out at the breakers, broken herself.

Eva and I fluttered around her helplessly. Sure, we liked the Game, but we weren't cruel, and we didn't like to see this.

"I'd forgotten," Eva said softly, "how much it hurts being F 'n' B."

"Worth having sex and chocolate?" I asked, not sure if I knew the answer myself, because there were always these sneaker waves in the flesh and bone world, ready to pummel you from behind when you least expected it.

After a long time, Helen stopped crying. She gave a long, shuddering sigh, turned, and began plodding through the sand in the direction of the motel.

"Helen!" a voice called.

All three of us looked up. Morris ran toward us in an odd sort of gait, his boat shoes slipping and sinking into the soft sand. He was clutching something to his chest.

Helen sucked in her breath and went rigid beside me. As he grew nearer, Eva said, "Ten points if he apologizes."

"No deal," I said.

Morris came up to Helen, breathless and red-faced.

"I brought the candy," he said.

"Oh," was all she said.

I heard the crinkle of the bag as he opened it, peered inside, and then pulled out one of the chocolate coffee melts.

"Here," he said, handing it to her.

"It'll ruin my dinner," she said in a forlorn voice, as if that might possibly be the worst thing that could happen to her.

"So let's skip the Cunninghams and have our own dinner. Later."

At this, she smiled through watery eyes and took the chocolate, popping the whole thing into her mouth.

"Ooooh, this is like a movie," Eva breathed.

"Good?" Morris asked, so intent that it might have been a life-or-death question.

"Wonderful," Helen said, still blinking back tears.

"I'm … I'm sorry," he said. "I've … I've been a jerk. As usual."

"Sorry for what?" Eva said. "Sorry for *what*? We never heard what the fight was about."

"No points on the apology," I said as a reminder. "And does it matter?"

Helen leapt forward then, right into his arms, clasping him in a fierce hug. "Oh, Morris." she sighed.

"Like a movie," I said, caught up in the moment.

"They're smashing the candy," Eva observed, not so caught up.

Morris and Helen hugged for a long time, and when they finally stepped back, he took her hand and led her down the beach, in the opposite direction of the motel.

"Watch out for the sneaker waves," Eva called after them, but of course they didn't hear, having just survived one of the hundreds of sneaker waves that marriage lobs at couples.

"Thanks for the fudge." Morris's voice barely carried over the crash of the waves, but I heard him say it and so did Eva.

Fifty points and a happy ending. Could I have asked for anything else? I mean other than chocolate? ❧

DEAD MAN'S TALE

BY BILLIE AUL

ILLUSTRATION BY JOEL SPECTOR

The pieces of Anastazyius Talaj lay on the morgue tray, each wrapped in its own individual plastic bag, looking like the beef section in the local supermarket. The morgue attendant watched me with narrowed eyes, as if I might be planning to steal a round roast for Sunday dinner.

How's he supposed to reassemble himself with the stasis spell on him?" I could feel the icy tendrils of the spell wrap themselves around my aura, slowing ... pulling ... I stepped away from the tray.

"You don't believe all that hooey the perp's been spouting about Talaj being Undead and asking to be cut up, do you?" He shoved the tray back inside its niche in the wall and closed the door.

"Just giving the accused the benefit of the doubt."

"Not much doubt for him to benefit by. We've retrieved enough pieces to make up nearly the full weight of Stazi Talaj, minus the blood that went down the bathtub drain. And we take the stasis field off for ten minutes every day. No signs of reanimation, let alone resurrection. That boy killed him dead. And the DA's gonna prove it."

"So you don't believe Talaj was Undead?"

"Nah. The kid wanted his money, it's as simple as that."

It wasn't anywhere near that simple as far as my client, the Undead Anti-Defamation Association, was concerned. They figured it this way: if Talaj was Undead, they didn't want his rights to free expression trampled by government officials. An Undead person had every right to ask his lover to cut him up into little bits and to strew the parts over a hundred-square-mile area of the Catskills and Hudson River Valley. Who were law enforcement officers, with a narrow, Mortal view of such activities, to interfere with an Undead citizen's right to reassemble himself?

On the other hand, if Talaj was Human, the UADA wanted to make sure his lover didn't get away with murder by inventing the "Undead defense."

This wouldn't have required a detective if Talaj had filed any kind of papers anywhere that indicated minority status as one of the Underground Folk. However, the Undead had lived among Humans for millennia before the melting of the polar ice caps flooded the traditional homes of many of the Folk and drove them to the surface. Many Undead felt no need to reveal themselves in the many-flavors, many-toppings, soft ice cream swirl of diversity that had replaced the melting pot ethos of the previous century. They simply continued to live like Humans as they had before. So Talaj could be among their number, or he could be one very dead Human with a former lover who thought he'd committed the perfect crime.

And it was my job to find out which.

It would have been easier if I'd had some leads. But after checking that Mr. Talaj's rights to reassemble weren't being violated by morgue procedures, the rest of my day was a blank slate.

His lover, William "Chen" Chen, a barely-twenty Asian-American who had left home to become a street punk after disappointing his parents by failing to get into Stanford, was inaccessible in jail. Besides, the police had his story. He had met Talaj at a gay bar in Manhattan a little over two years ago. They'd fallen instantly in love, despite their age difference. (Talaj claimed to be 65 though there was no documentation to prove it.) After a whirlwind courtship, Talaj had invited the younger man to live with him in his home in the Catskills. Their relationship had been ...—the police report stopped being verbatim here, probably to avoid offending the typist with vivid descriptions of their sex life. There was enough to infer that things were lively and experimental, and that Talaj, having run through the usual material to experiment with, had revealed that he was unable to die by ordinary means. Chen claimed Talaj expressed great interest in being cut up and strewn all over the countryside, then left to reassemble himself. Chen, ever the good, giving, and game lover, had obliged him.

Unfortunately, Chen had been caught feeding part of Talaj to the bears on Bear Mountain (according to Chen his lover derived a particular thrill from traversing digestive systems). When his car was searched, the police found 15 more pounds of meat in the trunk. Chen was arrested for feeding the animals, and the meat was sent to a lab to be checked for poison. The lab found no poison, but they did discover that what they were analyzing was Human body parts or, after the UADA insisted on a correction, at the very least proteins made of Human DNA.

Chen, now being booked for murder, confessed all, or according to the DA made it up on the fly, and told the authorities how to find the other pieces of Talaj.

Since there weren't laboratory tests for every kind of Undeadness—Vampires' DNA changed but lots of other Undead Folk maintained Human bodies including Golems, Zombies, and many who didn't identify as part of a particular group—the authorities decided to wait and see if Talaj reassembled before proceeding with a trial. They tried to expedite the process, which Chen estimated might take six weeks to two months, by collecting as many pieces as they could and putting them in close proximity in the county morgue. The parts showed no signs of reanimation.

Chen professed to be mystified, but stuck by his story. A search of the house produced nothing to back him up. They did find Talaj's recently signed power of attorney giving Chen access to all his accounts. There was no will.

The police had done a cursory investigation, barely going into Talaj's background at all. They didn't have to prove whether he was Human or not. If he was Undead he'd reassemble himself; if not, they'd charge Chen with murder and worry about the Undead defense if they couldn't get him to cop a plea. I figured questioning the neighbors might be helpful. The police had barely interviewed them; they might have more information that would help me.

Since I only had a street address, 10 Ledgecliffe Lane, and no map, I stopped at a mini-mart to ask directions. The Leprechaun at the counter narrowed his eyes at me.

"Would you be some kind of reporter?" His Irish brogue was thick. Because of their accents, many people claimed that Leprechauns weren't actually native Underground Folk and that they'd snuck over during the chaos created by the Flood. The Leprechauns claimed they'd first come over to North American in the 8th century when Irish monks crossed the Atlantic to spread the gospel, unsuccessfully, to the Native Americans. This made them ancient residents compared to the neophyte Fairies who had arrived only in the 1960s after the impassioned cry, "I do believe in Fairies. I do; I do," of millions of TV viewers watching *Peter Pan* year after year had summoned them.

The Leprechauns and their would-be expulsionists were gearing up for a lengthy court battle when Congress, perhaps lured by promises of pots of gold (nothing was ever proved), passed a law granting Leprechauns citizenship regardless of their origins.

The Leprechaun in front of me continued his harangue. "We'll not be needing any more reporters here about, writing foolish t'ings about Mr. Chen and Mr. Talaj. There's deeper matters here. The police have made a complete botch of the case."

"You sound like you know Talaj and Chen pretty well."

"And if I did, why should I be telling the likes of you? I've a good mind to t'row you out on your ear." That would have been difficult, as he was only about 18 inches high and had to stand on a barstool to see over the counter, where I'm about 5'9".

"Hold on, hold on." I pulled out my license. "I'm a private detective, not a reporter, and I'm particularly interested in what the police overlooked."

After barely glancing at my license, he leaned over the counter and gave me a conspiratorial wink. "Sure, and it's glad I am that Mr. Chen is taking t'ings more seriously. I was afraid he'd been bewitched into sticking to that fool story to the bitter end."

"You don't believe that Talaj was Undead?"

"That's as may be." He sat down on his stool and crossed his legs, clearly getting into storytelling mode. "He came in here regular to get a newspaper and, if you had asked me, I would have said he was Human. But I would have also said he had a secret. He was never one to shoot the breeze with a body, or say more than 'please' and

'thank you.'" The store clerk nodded to himself. "Now, Mr. Chen, he was a talker. After he moved in with Mr. Talaj, he'd come down for the paper, often as not, and pick up donuts or soda and chips. He was a young man, not careful with his diet like Mr. Talaj. And, as I said, he was a talker. First, he tried to make out like he was some tough punk off the streets, but you could see it was an act. I just let him think I believed him. But after a few months o' that, he got to talking about how good Mr. Talaj was to him and how much in love he was. Good for each other is what I'd say. When Mr. Talaj would come in, he looked happier too, in his secret way."

I realized I wasn't getting any hard evidence about Talaj's status, one way or the other. "So, what do you think happened?"

"Well, now, it's hard for the likes of me to say. There's goings-on that we wee folk keep our noses out of. Let's just say there's powerful forces on that mountain that could be behind a lot of mysterious things." He looked around him as if invisible ears were listening to him. Then he suddenly pulled out a map and started rattling off directions as if most of the previous conversation had never taken place.

"You turn right on Jones Hill Road and head up the hill. Keep going up at Thunderclap. Don't be turning down to the quarry."

"Was that a right or left on Thunderclap?"

"Neither one. It's straight you'll be going, they changed the name of the road in the middle."

"Why?"

"Because the Jones's were smart enough not to lay claim to the whole hill. Now listen carefully. When you come to the top of the hill, just keep going." He stopped and looked me straight in the eye. "Do not be going down Bowling Alley Lane. Stay straight on Thunderclap."

I followed his finger on the map as he traced the route. "There is no Bowling Alley Lane on this map."

"Aye, and it's best you be ignoring it as well."

I nodded. "OK, then what?"

"Just over the crest of the hill, turn right onto Ledgecliffe. You can't miss it. It's got a sign 'Artist Colony Estates.'"

I decided to buy the map, even though it was missing the mysterious Bowling Alley Lane. As he was ringing up the sale, I heard him mutter, "I don't understand why they'd pick on Mr. Talaj. He got along with them for years before the Flood brought in the development."

Jones Hill Road (aka Thunderclap), which had once serviced a few farmers, vacation homes, and the occasional artist's retreat, was now the main thoroughfare connecting development after development up the slope of the rather substantial hill in the Catskill Mountains about 75 miles, or about 30 minutes on the bullet train, north of the Manhattan wall. The new housing was occupied by thousands of suburbanites who been forced uphill by the flooding of the lowlands. Still, in this latter part of the morning, the road was almost deserted and what little traffic there was seemed to be fleeing to the valley below. So I was surprised, on rounding a sharp bend, to find a short man with a long white beard thumbing for a lift in the direction I was headed. I pulled over and said I was going as far as Ledgecliffe. He clambered in and hoisted himself into the seat, dragging a heavy leather case in after him. He couldn't have been more than four feet tall. He wore a tall black felt hat reminiscent of something a Pilgrim would have worn, an ill-fitting white shirt, and pantaloons.

"You live around Ledgecliffe?" Maybe I'd lucked onto one of the neighbors who knew Talaj.

"You could say that." His voice was high, as if he were a pituitarially challenged individual. We used to call them dwarves before we met the barrel-chested, deep-voiced Dwarves of the Underground.

"You know Anasztazsius Talaj?"

"Bowled with him a couple of times."

"So you were friends?"

"Didn't know him long enough to be friends. He was a good bowler, until that Chen came along. Hasn't been bowling since."

"That's too bad," I said absently. I was wondering if the heavy leather bag contained a bowling ball and why that made me feel nervous. "I'm a detective looking into his the recent incident involving his body. Did he ever say anything to you to make you think he was Undead?"

"Considering he didn't say anything to anyone else, why do you think he'd say anything to me? What a dumb question. How do you expect to find out anything if all you do is ask dumb questions?" He harrumphed and crossed his arms across his chest in disgust.

He was clearly one of what I call the Short, Surly Folk. There are a bunch of them: Dwarves, Troglodytes, Schact Zwergen, Norggen.

They liked living underground and aren't happy at all about the post-Flood situation. They have a tendency to get ticked off for no discernable reason. Generally they were harmless curmudgeons. Still, there was something about him that was making me nervous. I decided to placate him.

"This is a pretty unusual situation for a detective. Usually you know what's been done, and you can asked pointed questions like, 'Where were you when Mr. Talaj was murdered.'" I glanced at him. He was still looking disgruntled. "But I can't very well do that, when I don't even know if anyone is dead, let alone if there's been a murder. What do you think happened?"

"I think, whatever it was, it'll be bad for bowling. Turn right here."

It was only after I'd turned onto the unmarked street that I realized I was on Bowling Alley Lane. A clap of thunder made me jump, though there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Oops. I glanced at my companion again and at the case he was carrying. It was definitely a bowling ball. Here I was driving near the peak of one of the Catskill mountains, one of the Folk with a bowling ball in tow. I wondered just how much trouble I was in.

Then directly ahead was a bowling alley, one of the fancy kind from the last century, before the "Bowling Alone" period. It was huge, made with gold-toned bricks with all kinds of fancy work done in contrasting pearlescent greens, reds, and oranges. The roof was curved up into a dome and at the top was a huge sign, which read "Thunder Dome Lanes."

I wanted to gun the engine and tear out of there, but I've learned since the Flood that things went better with the Folk if you just treated them as if whatever was happening was normal, because, after all, it was normal for them. So I pulled up to the door to let my passenger out and hoped that Tlws, my sometimes-lover-sometimes-friend would water my plants while I was away. Of course, if I was gone as long as Rip Van Winkle, I hoped he'd just pack everything up and stick it in storage. Otherwise I'd have a huge amount of back rent to pay.

The little man opened the door, hopped out, dragging his bowling ball with him. "Want to come in for a game? Shoes are free on Tuesdays."

I shook my head, reached across and closed the door after him, turned around at what I hoped was a casual pace, and then floored the accelerator until I was back on Thunderclap. I slowed down and looked at my watch. Almost one o'clock in the afternoon, but apparently the same day that I'd started out on. I'd picked the hitcher up at around 10 AM. I tuned in the radio news and confirmed that it was the same day (or at least the top news story was exactly the same). I took a deep breath and tried to still my racing heart. That could have been a lot worse.

Then I realized I'd just passed Ledgecliffe. I threw the car into reverse, backed up, made the turn, and started looking for number 10.

Talaj's place was an Arts and Crafts bungalow with a late 20th-century addition off the back. It had probably once been the lone building on a large plot of land. It was now nearly surrounded by a housing development. The other houses on the street were all less than 10 years old, in neo-Japanese style, with wood-like trim at the windows and doors. Most of the trees were gone, replaced by super-absorbent grass, the kind engineered to deter mud slides. It grew in terraced plots that probably ran all the way down the hill. Only the

land going up the hill, in back of number 10 and its neighbors was wooded. And deeply wooded at that, possibly with old-growth wood. Must have been owned by someone who wouldn't sell. Usually the developers build right up to the summit, calling the houses on top the penthouses.

The house on the left of Talaj's, number 12, looked like no one had been home for a while, or at least anyone who cared to mow the grass. It was overgrown, and a few maple seedlings had gotten a healthy start. I rang the bell.

While I was waiting, I heard what sounded like thunder, though the sky was clear blue. I wondered if you could hear the bowling alley down here.

When there was no answer, I turned my attention to number 8, which had owners who at least understood its style. There was a terraced rock garden down the hillside in the back and small patches of native plants interspersed with ornamental shrubs and crushed stone walkways occupied the front. A tall, dark, lanky man wearing a work shirt and chinos was pruning what looked like an oriental plum. His hair was black, just starting to show traces of gray.

I crossed back past number 10 and hailed him. "Know where the folks in number 12 are?"

He looked up at the sound of my voice and headed down one of the paths to greet me. "They're not around much. We barely see them."

"Maybe you can help me. Did you know Mr. Talaj at all?"

"You a reporter?" He was unconsciously backing up the walkway.

"No, a detective. Sam Thompson." I handed him my license. "I'm working for the Undead Anti-Defamation Association, trying to find out if Mr. Talaj was really Undead as Mr. Chen claims."

He looked at my license and at me. "Is Sam short for Samantha?" He handed it back.

"My mother thunks so. I just go by Sam."

He nodded. "I'm Jim Ruth." He stuck out his hand and we shook. "And I'm very glad to see someone looking into all this. The police just decided it was Chen without much of an investigation."

"Seems like they gave undue weight to the body parts in the trunk and the confession."

Ruth moved his pruning shears to his left hand and mopped his brow with a handkerchief. "I know." He smile ruefully. "It does make sense. But we've known Stazi for a long time now, and it's hard to think of him being taken in by someone. Don't get me wrong. Chen's definitely interested in having nice things, and he has the street smarts to figure out that story and kill Stazi if he'd wanted to. But I don't see why he would have wanted to. They seemed to be in love to me. And you know, if Stazi was Undead, I can see him going in for something like dismemberment. That kind of test of devotion, that's Stazi all over."

He'd mostly been musing to himself. Now he looked at me. "But you should come talk to my wife, Barbara. She's known Stazi longer than I have."

On the way to the house I asked how they'd met Talaj.

"Barbara had business connections with Stazi in New York. He was very helpful to her, and we started seeing each other socially from time to time. We actually found out about this house through him. He's been here since before the development went in. You can tell his is the original house. It was an artist's cottage, back before the Flood. He came out here to get away from the New York rat race. He was lucky. It just got worse."

"Do you know much about his background, where he came from?"

"That's where I think Barbara can help you more than I can."

Their interior decorating was in the same tasteful Japanese style as the outside: spare, with lots of Wood-lite. Several scrolls with Japanese calligraphy hung on the walls of the foyer and living room. They were all worth taking the time to really look at. While I have the feeling that you can't truly appreciate Oriental brushwork unless you can read the scripts, these all seemed to me to have inner power and grace.

Not only were the calligraphies themselves lovely, but each was framed by a border made of a patchwork of richly colored, patterned silk. One in particular, which had a rather chunky block of text, unlike its more flowing neighbors, sported a border featuring a collection of exquisite red silks, the color remaining the same but the pattern shifting through each section of the border, complementing but not detracting from the ink design in the middle. I continued to admire them until Mrs. Ruth came in.

"Are they old?" I asked her after the introductions and hand-shaking were complete.

"No, they're mine. I'm a graphic artist. I mostly do fabric design, but I like the intensity of ink-and-brush work." She motioned me in the direction of an armchair. She and her husband perched on the couch. She was a slim woman, probably in her early 40s, starting to go gray.

"Did you design the silk for the scrolls as well?"

She nodded. "Actually that's how I met Stazi. He was a big clothing designer in New York, and he was looking for hand-dyed silks. He bought a lot of my work and, when he couldn't use anything of mine in a given season, he passed on my name to other designers. He was very helpful to me, until he got out of the business."

"Why did he leave?"

"I think he just got tired of having to be creative on demand. The fall line has to be designed at the same time every year no matter what mood you're in. It's not the same as doing work for its own sake." Her eyes flicked to her own accomplishments. She looked back at me. "Anyway, he got out just in time. When the Fairies took over the art scene after the Flood, Humans had a really tough time."

I'd heard this from other Human artists—that the Fairies just took over all the creative work and there weren't any jobs left. The Fairies said it was a combination of things: the novelty of being able to get something made by one of the Folk coupled with the economic downturn due to the Flood. My parents had taught me that the new immigrant group always gets blamed for society's ills. Since tension causes conflict and conflict generates my type of business, I tried to live with whatever prejudice was currently being expressed.

"So you know that Talaj was Human?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to swear to it in court." She hesitated. "Stazi was always pretty close-mouthed about some things. I didn't even know he was gay until he took up with Chen. He certainly always seemed Human."

"Do you think Rhea would know one way or the other?" Jim asked his wife.

She turned to him. "I'm not sure I'd trust her now. She'll just back up whatever Chen says."

"Who's Rhea?"

Mr. Ruth started. "She's our real estate agent. She knew Stazi before he moved here. She's the one that got him the house up here on the mountain, before anything else was built. And, Barbara, I really think you're over..."

His wife interrupted. "She's an old friend, but I have to be honest. I think she might be having an affair with Chen. The last time Stazi had us over she was there and the two of them kept exchanging glances. And tell about what you heard, Jim."

"I'm really not sure it was Rhea. Someone was arguing with Chen out back about a week ago. It wasn't Stazi. And, anyway, according to Chen it was a couple of days after Stazi ... umm, disappeared. The only words I could make out were Chen saying, "Don't worry about Stazi. I've got everything taken care of."

I looked at Mrs. Ruth again. "And how do you know it was Rhea he was arguing with?"

"I just know, that's all."

On my way back down the mountain, the little man was hitching again. I pulled over. At least he was headed down the mountain, not up.

He clambered into the front seat. He didn't have his bowling ball. "I could still use some information about Talaj," I said.

"I just wanted you to know something about Rip."

"OK."

"Mrs. Winkle paid us to keep him that long. She figured out she was better off without him around."

"Makes sense. I always thought she was pretty lucky to lose him. Is someone paying you to keep Talaj from resurrecting?"

"No one would have to pay me if he was Human in the first place."

"True. Do you know if he is?"

"Now we're back to dumb questions, just when I was starting to have a glimmer of hope."

"Why do you care what kind of questions I ask? You're not answering them anyway. Why should I go to the trouble of thinking up good questions?"

"Because life is like bowling. You can go through it, like Rip, just tossing the ball in the general direction of the pins and seeing what gets knocked over." He was staring out the passenger window, not really talking to me. "Or you can spend some time, learn how heavy the ball is, how fast it has to go to stay straight, how your arm interacts with it. You may not bowl any better, but you're going to play a more interesting game."

"OK, then, the real question I want to ask you is: Why won't you give me a straight answer to any of my questions about Talaj, but you're willing to answer anything else I ask."

He turned back to me. "Now that *is* a good question. This is my stop."

I pulled over at a school bus turnaround. He got out of the car, waved goodbye, and disappeared, quite literally.

On the rest of the way into town, I wondered how dumb an actual perpetrator would have to be to call that much attention to himself. But then maybe he was clever, thinking I'd eliminate him for looking too dumb.

"It wasn't me arguing with Chen. At least, I don't think so. I suppose I could have been having an out-of-body experience. But then why would I be arguing? They're always so peaceful. Maybe he was arguing with a psychic projection of me." Rhea looked doubtful. "But Chen isn't very psychic, so that's not likely to be it."

I'd caught up with Rhea Troy at her patchouli-scented, candle-ornamented real estate office on Main Street in Vedderville. When I'd arrived, she'd decided it was late enough in the day to close up shop. Now we were sitting with iced ginger tea in her living room. In addition to the standard Feng Shui accouterments—candles, stones, water, and wood—the room was covered with beadwork. There were wooden beads and stone beads, no doubt in their proper orientations. There were beads in the fountain and beads surrounding the candles. But most particularly, there were two very fine and intricate loomwork hangings on the walls, nonrepresentational patterns in flowing colors that seemed to cascade down the walls.

And there was one other thing that was obvious in the well-lit room that I hadn't been entirely sure of in her dimly lit office or on the walk to her house when she'd worn a bulky jacket to ward off the chilly spring evening. Rhea was pregnant, probably six or seven months.

"You know," she went on after serving the tea, "I'm not sure I'd trust everything Barbara said about me. She's been kind of jealous since I got pregnant. She tries to hide it, but I'm psychic and it's very clear. I know she can't have children of her own and the adoption process is just taking forever, but I don't know why she has to take it out on me. The last time I was up there, it was as if daggers were coming out of her eyes. And I was barely showing yet. Stazi didn't notice a thing."

"Who's the father?"

She startled and then tried to act calm. "Oh, an unknown sperm donor. I had my cards read about a year ago and they said I needed to develop my inner nurturer, so I decided to get pregnant." She looked at me as if I might not believe her. To me just about any reason to have kids seemed bizarre; hers didn't strike me as weirder than average.

"Can you think of anyone else Chen might have been talking to?"

"Well, he could have been talking to Stazi. Oh, no, I guess not, since he was talking *about* Stazi." She shrugged, an elaborate yoga-like movement accompanied by a sigh. "I can't think of anyone."

I tried another tack. "Do you know if Mr. Talaj was Undead or not?"

"Well, he must have been. Otherwise, Chen wouldn't have cut him up, would he?"

"There is the problem of why he's not reassembling as he was supposed to."

"I think Stazi must have something to work out on the astral plane above us before he's allowed to come back."

"I hope he gets it worked out before they throw Chen in jail for life."

Her mouth made an "O" at that, and she started fidgeting. "My I Ching said that I was supposed to remain calm and think positive thoughts, but really that's the most positive thing I can think of. I mean, what if Stazi gave Chen some complicated directions about how to do it, and Chen wasn't listening? He can be so inattentive sometimes. Or what if the police interfered with some process, and now Stazi can't reassemble?"

'Or what if Talaj was Human and lied to Chen in order to commit suicide?' I was thinking aloud.

She grabbed a set of worry beads from the table nearest her. "That would be terrible." She was genuinely horrified. "And Stazi can get so moody." For a minute, I was afraid she was going to cry, but she pulled herself out of it. "But he would have known that would get Chen accused of murder. He wouldn't have done that. He really loved Chen, and besides, he's a very thoughtful person. He just wouldn't get someone in trouble that way."

"What about Chen cutting him up to get access to his money?"

"No way." She shook her head violently. "Chen was devoted to Stazi. I mean he ..." She stopped herself in mid-sentence and then took another tack. "He didn't do it on purpose. I just know it." She patted her abdomen as if asking her baby for confirmation of her statement.

"Do you have any evidence that Talaj was Undead?"

"His aura was really weird."

I kept myself from rolling my eyes. "So you knew the first time you met him?"

"Well, no, not really. At the time I thought it was just the "Powerful Man" aura. I mean he was a big designer, and I was only about 20 trying to sell my jewelry."

"Is all the beadwork in here yours?"

"Most of it. Though some of it came from other craftspeople. We trade work a lot. The pieces on the wall are my good stuff."

I admired them again. If she was trading work like that for the kitsch in her living room, she was even flakier than she looked. "They're very good."

"Thanks, they took me forever. I'm not like Barbara. She can just see something in her head and make it happen. I have to really work at getting it to look the way I want. That's why I can't make my living doing beadwork. It must be some bad karma from a past life. The fast stuff is only good for local craft shows and trades, and the good stuff takes so long I could never charge for the time it took me."

Stazi warned me when he bought those first pieces from me. He said, 'Learn to do it fast, or get out. That's when I got into real estate."

"The Ruths said you sold him the house out here?"

"Yeah, about 12 years ago. Before the Flood. Said he wanted someplace quiet, where he could think. After he'd been out there about a year, he bought the whole top of the mountain behind the house. Boy, that was a chore. The deed went back to the Revolution and he had to track all the heirs and get them all to agree to sell. There must have been 15 people involved. But the land on either side of him and in the front was held by other folks and he didn't get around to buying it before the developer moved through and snatched everything else up. Offered him a huge amount for the top. I told him to sell and get something else that was isolated, but he wouldn't. He tried to buy the plots on either side from the developer, but by that time there were houses on them and they were real expen-

sive. He got number 12. He's renting it to some folks named Hudson. But he couldn't afford 8 too. That's when he got the idea to see if the Ruths wanted to move in."

"So, aside from his aura, do you have any proof that Talaj was Undead?"

"Except that he looked 60 when I met him 15 years ago and he doesn't look a day older? Not much. I know that you won't find a record of his birth. He needed it for some kind of legal work a few years ago and had all sorts of problems when he couldn't produce it. He complained for months because the government just wouldn't believe that he was born in Yugoslavia and the records burned when the Serbs torched the archives. I really wish I could think of something to help you." She was fingering her worry beads again.

"Maybe you know some of his old friends in New York?"

"Oh, sure, I know lots of them."

She wrote me a list which I took and headed home to New Jersey.

I spent a fruitless day in the City interviewing people who knew Talaj. Yes, he'd always said he was from Yugoslavia. He'd always looked like he was in his early 60s. He'd appeared on the fashion scene in the 90s with no real background, but good enough not to need any. If he had any kinky habits like periodically getting himself cut up and reassembling himself, no one he'd worked with knew about them. Of course, working in fashion as he did, he'd been in with the gay male A-List crowd, and several informants thought there was a former lover or two seeded among them. But that was a group who had guarded the sexual secrets of clergymen and legislators, many of whom had spent their closeted hours denouncing the sin of Sodom. The secrets of the Undead were surely safe among that closed-mouthed a group.

It shows the level of my frustration, though, that I asked my boyfriend Tlws, who has a number of A-List friends, about it at dinner in Trenton that night.

"Do you think you could call Tom and just see who ..."

He shook his head. "Not even to get on the good side of the UADA."

"It was a bad idea anyway. I just need to trace his contacts more thoroughly. Find his immigration papers or someone who knew him before he was a fashion designer. Though if he *is* Undead, he probably covered his tracks really well and it'll all lead to a cul-de-sac. But then, if he is Undead, he'll reassemble, and I won't have to worry about it."

I fluffed my Pad Thai with my chopsticks to cool it. "Everyone but Barbara is so convinced that he and Chen were a great couple. Why didn't he make sure Chen could prove he was Undead? No one has guaranteed immortality."

"Because you forget you're vulnerable." Tlws was over 400 years old, though he looked late 20-something—a luxurious-blond haired, unfathomable-mountain-lake-blue-eyed, peak-of-bodily perfection late 20-something. Barring disbelief in the general Human population or a terrible accident, he would live well into his thousands, most of it without developing notable body flaws. "You've survived so many stupid mistakes and so much bad timing that you just don't make plans for it to happen anymore. And if Talaj is the kind of Undead I think he is, he'd be even less careful than I am as a Fairy."

"What kind do you think he is? The UADA just talked vaguely about undifferentiated types. I mean, I know he's not a Vampire and no one's complained about his smell so I'm pretty sure he's not a Zombie. I thought maybe a Golem and someone tore up his piece of paper ..."

"They're all external Undead." In response to my quizzical look, Tlws elaborated. "Something outside them—human blood, their master's spell, their scroll of holy script—keeps them alive. I think Talaj is an internal Undead, someone whose will to live is so strong that the state of his body is irrelevant to him. That trick with letting himself be eaten is what made me suspicious. Not all the material eaten is going to be available for reanimation in his predicted resurrection time. He must be able to actually recreate from scratch some of the cells that he's made of."

"Or Chen wants us to think that, and Talaj is really Human."

Tlws cocked an eyebrow at me over his wine glass. "Do you believe that?"

"No. I think he's Undead. In fact I'm pretty sure someone is using magic to keep him from reassembling. I just don't think I can prove it." I pushed a shrimp around on my dinner plate for a while. But I wasn't thinking about the case. I was wondering why the UADA had hired me instead of someone with Power, if magic was likely to be involved.

I looked at my dinner companion who just happened to be New Jersey's High Commissioner of Magic and broke my silence. "This was your doing, wasn't it? You figured some pretty powerful magic might be involved, but because the incident took place in New York, you weren't going to get in on the action. So you called the UADA and suggested they hire me." I was really pissed but I kept my voice low. There's nothing worse than reading your dinner conversation in the morning paper.

"No, Sam, they called me looking for someone with Power to investigate, but I recommended you. It's probably magic, but it was unclear until you investigated. And I knew you'd be objective and thorough and not start off making erroneous assumptions. Besides, getting more magic involved in a situation like this can make things a lot worse. It's better to find out who's doing what, and get them to stop if it's wrong. You're good at that sort of thing."

He raised his chopsticks slowly, a piece of tofu and a sliver of red pepper elegantly captured between them. "I'm interested in the case, but if you want to talk about something else, it'd be fine with me." He put the food in his mouth and chewed.

Now I was angry at myself. I hate to be wrong. But it's worse not to admit it. "OK, point taken. But if I'm looking for some powerful magician, I've only got one candidate." I told him about my experience with the man with the bowling ball.

Tlws was skeptical. "I know time dilation is very weird to Humans, but it's mostly a matter of lei lines. There's not much magic involved."

"OK, how about them all being Hendrick Hudson and his men? It would take magic to keep them alive this long."

"If they really are Hudson and his crew and not just Folk who came along for the ride and decided to settle here."

I was determined to convince him. "What about what the Leprechaun said?"

Tlws thought about it. "OK, I'll admit that makes it more likely they've got powerful magic. But even he couldn't come up with a reason they'd pick on Talaj." He sipped at his coffee, while I nibbled some lotus cake. "Look, Sam, you have really good instincts, but you tend to think that when Folk are acting strangely by Human standards that they're suspicious, just as you would think with a Human. But the Folk are more ..." he hesitated, looking for the right word. "Constrained by archetypes than Humans are. Sometimes their odd behavior should be looked at in terms of the archetypical role they're fulfilling."

"But sometimes what they're doing is suspicious."

He nodded, almost conceding the argument. "Yes. But the bowling ball guy is not my first choice in this case."

"So who is?"

He thought about it while the waiter cleared the table. "I admit there aren't a lot of candidates. What about Rhea?"

I wrinkled my nose. "She's too much of a space cadet."

"It could be an act."

"It's a damned good one if it is." I thought about it for a moment. "There is something not quite right about her story. She seems to be hiding something, though it's probably something silly like the name of her tarot card reader. But talking to her again isn't going to cost me a couple of days, which is probably what it'll take to talk to the bowling ball man again."

As we left, the conversation turned to other matters. I didn't think about the case again until morning.

I woke up and realized that I had an easy way to eliminate Rhea without trekking back up to the Catskills. I got up and looked her up on Santa Claus's NaughtyandNice.com. It was a subscription service, and I don't use it much because they charged per search, but when it saves me on transportation costs, it's worth it.

I typed in "Rhea Troy," expecting "Nice but flaky" to pop up on the screen. Instead it said, "Rhea and Chen, naughty, naughty." I guess the other reason I don't search it often is that it sometimes just confuses me. Now I was going to have to go back to Vedderville and start again.

While I was searching, I decided to check my own listing. It was the same as it always is.

"Too nice for your own good. Santa certainly has you pegged." Elves had snuck up behind me and peeked over my shoulder. Now he nudged me aside and started typing. "What am I?"

"Hey, that costs money." But he'd already hit the send key.

"Elves, naughty as ever," the screen read.

"What did you expect after last night?" I asked.

He turned and kissed me. I pulled away. "Well, maybe not immediately ... "I have to go to work and so do you," I finally panted.

He was going to argue but thought better of it. "OK, why don't you come to my place tonight and I'll see if I can be even more naughty."

"Would you care to tell me why you and Chen are on Santa's Naughty list?" I had arrived at Rhea's office at 9 AM. I was glad to find it empty of people interested in real estate. This confrontation would best be done in private.

"What do you mean?" She seemed genuinely surprised.

"You and Chen appeared on Santa's Naughty list on the same day six months before Talaj disappeared, and you're still there. Was that when the affair started, or is that when you decided to get rid of Chen's boyfriend?"

"Six months before ... but that would have been when we ... But that should have put me on the Nice list ..." She sounded more bemused than guilty. I waited for more.

"Seven months ago is when I got pregnant. I'm having Chen and Stazi's baby." She caught herself. "I mean one of their babies. Chen mixed the sperm so we don't know whose baby it is."

"Any chance Chen didn't, er, mix?"

"Oh." That hadn't occurred to her before. "I don't think so. He keeps talking about how he hopes it's Stazi's so it looks like him."

"What does Stazi say?"

"We haven't told him. It's a surprise."

"You're going to surprise someone with a baby to raise?"

"Oh, I'm sure it's fine. Chen said Stazi's always talking about having a young one around the house. And Chen's really excited too. That's why I'm so sure that whatever's happened to Stazi was an accident."

"It's not an accident. Someone's deliberately using magic to keep Talaj from reanimating."

"Who would do such a thing?"

Again, her aversion to the idea seemed real. "You and Chen might, if you were trying to cover up an affair."

"No, no. We're not. We used a turkey baster. Besides, Chen is fun, but it's Stazi who's my real friend. He's done a lot for me: helped me with the jewelry business, bought real estate from me, steered the Ruths to me. I'm only having the baby because Chen convinced me that Stazi really wanted one. I would never have done it otherwise, no matter what my tarot reading said."

"Could Chen be stopping Talaj on his own?"

"No." She was adamant. "He really loves Stazi. Besides he hasn't got a magical bone in his body."

And I suspected neither did she, despite the candles and the auras and the psychic abilities. If she had, she would have done something to get her jewelry business working. No, she was telling the truth. The naughty thing she and Chen had done must have something to do with not telling Talaj about the baby.

"Did Talaj have enemies?"

"He was a major designer in New York City. Of course he had enemies. But none who would care now that he's retired. And I put them on the list I gave you yesterday."

No one I interviewed yesterday had shown any animosity toward Talaj that wasn't summed up in a few catty remarks. That was a dead end.

"What about the neighbors in number 12? The ones who rent from Talaj?"

"The Hudsons? I never met them. I think Talaj bowls with them, or used to before he met Chen."

"Bowls?"

I was practically in the car before I heard her say, "Yes, is that important?"

"Come on. I know you're in there." I shouted, pounding on the door of Talaj's tenants in number 12 Ledgecliffe.

After what seemed an eternity, the short guy with the beard opened the door. He blinked at me as if trying to adjust his eyes to the sunlight. "You could have come round to the front door, you know," he said grumpily. "It's easier to get to."

"I don't have a couple years to spend getting your attention. I need to know what you did with Talaj now, before they convict his lover for murder."

He stroked his beard and blinked at me again. "As far as I know, Mr. Talaj is in the county morgue."

"His body is, but someone's got his life-force, spirit, whatever you want to call it, and I'm betting its you."

"Nope, sorry." I stuck my foot in the door expecting him to try to close it. Instead he stepped outside and pulled out a long-stem meerschaum pipe from his waistcoat pocket. "Got a light?" he asked. He crossed the porch and proceeded to sit on the stoop.

I stood over him. "I want Talaj released now." I wondered just when "now" was if I was in a slow time zone. I glanced at my watch. It seemed to be running normally, but wouldn't it look normal to me no matter how fast time was going elsewhere?

"Why do you think I would have trapped Stazi's spirit?"

"Because he bought up the land that you bowl on and now he's making you pay rent."

"It really would be easier to talk if you'd give me a light for my pipe."

I sat down next to him, totally bewildered. I'd just accused him of kidnaping. He'd denied it and was now sitting on the stoop looking for a light. Guilty kidnappers did not act this way. Neither did innocent people accused of kidnaping. I sat for a moment, then pulled out the cigarette lighter I carry in my back pocket in case I'm ever trapped in a dark place without my flashlight. I handed it to him.

He lit his pipe, took his time getting it to draw and then handed me the lighter back. "Stazi bought up the land for us. We have trouble staying out in the fast time long enough to do legal business. The Van Winkles held the land for us for centuries, but it was getting hard to deal with all the heirs. When we figured out that Stazi was Undead, we thought it might work out better if he held the land. He was kind enough to agree."

"Well, someone wants him out of the way. Wait a minute, you're the person Mr. Ruth heard talking to Chen in the garage. Your voice is high, just like a woman's. You know what's going on, it's time to spill the beans."

"Someone wants something that they can have if Stazi and Chen are both out of the way."

"And that is?"

"Just how much information do you want for three lousy favors?"

Sometimes I'm pretty dense. Meet a surly old person on the road, give him a lift or two, a light and you get information to get you on the right road. If you're willing to follow it.

Continued on page 88

Sunday

My name is Sunday Woodcutter, and I'm ungrateful.

I am the seventh daughter of Jack and Seven Woodcutter. Jack a seventh son and Seven a seventh daughter herself. Papa's goal in life was to give birth to the charmed, all-powerful, much talked-about Seventh Son of a Seventh Son. Mama told him she had just enough in her for seven girls or seven boys, but not both. Papa was sure his dream would come true when Jack Junior was the first of us to introduce himself to the world. That dream died the morning I popped out—eight children later—and Mama declared her womb officially closed for business.

I never knew Jack Junior, but I know his legend. I grew up surrounded by overdramatic songs and stories of his exploits and adventures, a good number of which continue to pop up about the countryside to this very day. At a very young age, I decided that the truth about him lay in the pauses between the sagas and the stanzas, in those brief moments when a man is still a man and not a mountain. The silence paints a picture of a handsome, hotheaded youth of too many words and too few thoughts to precede them. One thought more might have stopped my eldest brother before he killed young Prince Rumbold's prize watchdog, one word less and he might not have goaded the prince's evil father into siccing the prince's evil fairy godmother on him. Jack Junior was witched into a dog and forced to work in the slain mutt's stead forevermore.

For fifteen long years my father has dutifully paid the family's tax and tithe, and despite the fact that he harbors no loyalty to the royal family whatsoever, Papa wisely never says a word against them. As the unhappy incident happened the year before I was born—with the whole of my family alive at the time save me—I have always felt entirely left out of the matter.

My second eldest brother's name is Jack as well, but we call him Jackie. The youngest's name is Trix—which everyone assumes simply stands for "Jack Number Three." They would be wrong of course, but none of us has ever felt compelled to correct them. Trix was a foundling child that Papa discovered in the limbs of a tree at the edge of the forest one winter's workday. Mama says she was resigned to the fact that since she already had eight children to feed, what was one more or less? I have a feeling I know the truth of that too. Attached to Mama's swift hand for discipline is the heart of a compassionate woman who could not abandon a child in the Wood, no matter how fey his origin.

My sisters and I—

"What are you doing?"

Sunday's head snapped up from her book, her heart fell into her stomach, and every hair on her arms stood on end. She had chosen this spot for its solitude, followed the half-hidden path through the underbrush to the decaying rocks of the abandoned well, sure that she had escaped from her family. And yet the voice that had interrupted her thoughts was not familiar to her.

Her eyes took a moment to adjust, slowly focusing in on the mottled shadows that the afternoon sun cast through the dancing leaves of the trees above.

"I'm sorry?" She posed the polite query to her unknown visitor in an effort to make him reveal himself, be he real or imagined, dead or alive, fairy or

"I said, 'What are you doing?'"

frog.

It took Sunday a second to make her gaping mouth form words that made sense. "I'm . . ." All caught off guard like that, she found herself sputtering the truth. "Telling myself stories."

"Why? Do you have no one to whom you can tell them?"

It took her another second. "Well, no . . . I have quite a big family, actually. With lots of stories. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Only no one wants to hear *my* stories. I could tell them, but they wouldn't listen."

"I will listen," said the frog. "Read me your story, the story that you have just written there, and I will listen."

It was completely absurd. Absurd that Sunday was somewhere in the middle of the Wood talking to a frog who wanted her to make him what she desired most in the world: a captive audience to her words. It was so absurd, in fact, that she started reading from the top of the page in her book without another thought.

"'My name is Sunday Woodcutter—'"

"Grumble," croaked the frog.

"If you're going to grumble through the whole thing, why did you ask me to read it in the first place?"

"You said your name was Sunday Woodcutter," said the frog, "and I thought it only fitting to introduce myself in kind. My name is Grumble."

"Oh." Her face felt hot. Sunday wondered briefly if frogs could tell that a human was blushing, or if they were one of the many other color-blind denizens of the forest. "It's very nice to meet you."

"Thank you," said Grumble. "Please, carry on with your story."

She did. It was a little awkward, as Sunday had never before read her musings aloud to anyone. Her voice sounded loud and the words seemed foreign and sometimes wrong; she resisted the urge to change them or scratch them out altogether as she went on. For as long as she had sat under the tree writing them down, they were quickly read and over with in no time at all.

"I had meant to go on about my sisters," Sunday apologized when she got to the end, "but—"

"I interrupted you. Forgive me." Grumble hopped forward onto a closer damp stone. "As you can imagine I don't get many visitors. I thank you for indulging me with your words, kind lady."

"It was an honor," she said automatically.

"Do you write often?"

"Yes. Every morning and every night and every moment I can sneak in between."

"And do you always write about your family?"

Sunday flipped the pages of her neverending journal—a gift from Fairy Godmother Joy—past her thumb. It was a nervous habit she had had all her life. "I do," she admitted, "but only because I am afraid to write anything else."

"Why is that?"

She shifted her legs to a more comfortable position beneath her skirts. "Things I write . . . well . . . they have a tendency to come true. And not in the best way."

"You must always be careful what you wish for," said the frog.

"Exactly," nodded Sunday. "So if I only write about events that have already come to pass, then there is no danger of my accidentally altering the future."

"A very practical decision," said Grumble.

"Yes," she sighed. "Very practical and very boring. Very just like me."

"On the contrary. I found your brief essay quite intriguing."

"Really?" The thought occurred to her that he was just saying it to be nice, because it was expected. And then she remembered he was a frog.

"Would you mind coming to read to me again tomorrow? I would love to hear more of the story."

If the smile Sunday knew was currently spread across her face didn't scare him off, surely nothing she wrote could. "I would love to."

"And would you . . . be my friend?"

The request was so charmingly humble. "Only if you will be mine in return."

Grumble's mouth opened wide into what Sunday took must have been a froggy grin.

"And . . . if I may be so bold, Miss Woodcutter. . ." he started.

"Please, call me Sunday."

"Sunday . . . do you think you could find it in your heart to kiss me?"

Sunday had wondered how long it would take before he got around to asking. She had assumed from the beginning that he was either a fey blessed amphibian or an enchanted man, and his overly proper mannerisms had her leaning toward the latter. A maiden's kiss was the usual remedy for that sort of thing. She was actually quite

impressed that he had managed to sneak it in during the mere hour of their brief acquaintance. But he had been very polite, and as Sunday was surely the only maiden he would come across for a very long time it was the least she could do

She placed her hands on the mossy stones of the ruined well and leaned down His skin was bumpy and slightly wet beneath her lips, but she tried not to think about it

Nothing happened

They sat there, staring at each other for a long time afterward.

"I don't have to come back, you know." Sunday told him, "in case you were offering just to be courteous."

"Oh, no," he said. "I look forward to hearing about your sisters Please, do come back tomorrow."

"Then I will, after I finish my chores But I should be going now, before it gets dark." She stood and brushed what dirt she could off her skirt. "Good night, Grumble."

"Good night, Sunday."

My sisters and I are the unfortunate product of a woman with as little creativity at naming as her mother before her Jack Junior was definitely his mother's son in this, for had she thought things through Mama might have realized that the naming of her daughters was as clever in its simplicity as it was damning in its curses Second born to my mother were the twins, thus securing a female majority in the household that was never again in jeopardy

Monday was indeed fair of face, but Tuesday was the dancer.

I have patchwork memories of a slip of a young woman, a moth at the flame, a vision of constant movement whose grace the reeds and sunsets envied The epitome of the life of the Party, Tuesday garnered invitations from Royal Balls to County Fairs She was loved by all who knew her, both human and fey. Mama enjoyed the popularity but complained about the cost of keeping her active daughter in shoes, which she often remarked was "more than enough for *twelve* dancing princesses." It seemed a godsend to her when an elfin shoemaker gifted Tuesday with a pair of scarlet slippers he swore would never wear out. It turned out to be true, for Tuesday could not dance those shoes to death

They danced her to death instead

There was immense sadness in the wake of Tuesday's passing, but no one mourned more than Monday. Once a week, Monday would walk the many miles from our ramshackle cottage in the Wood to the cemetery on the hill and place flowers on her twin's grave. Every Tuesday she went, rain or shine, sleet or snow, despite our parents' wishes One sickly green morning she went out again, heedless, and on the way home was caught in a storm sent from the bowels of hell itself Tossed in the wind, pelted by walls of rain and battered by fists of ice, Monday got lost in the Wood on the way back and found herself at the doorstep of a well-kept cabin.

Inside the cabin were two princes on hunting holiday—one dark and one fair—who had chosen to celebrate the storm as some men choose to celebrate everything. The fair prince began to congratulate himself on his recent success at finding a wife—he had given the girl a test and she had passed with flying colors, having spun three rooms full of straw into gold for him. The dark one proclaimed the Wife Test a marvelous idea, and determined that *his* wife would be so delicate that she would not be able to sleep comfortably with a pea under the mattresses. They were well into their cups when Monday arrived, a bedraggled wretch on the doorstep begging asylum.

The next morning, when Monday appeared before them with a rash of fresh bruises from head to toe, the dark prince fell to his knees and asked for her hand in marriage

We owe our current livelihood to Monday Her bridegift was a tower at the edge of the Wood that had no door—

"No door?" Grumble croaked in dismay.

"None whatsoever," Sunday said. "If it had ever been part of a castle, that part was long gone. The tower only had a window, and very high up The property belonged to the prince's grandmother. It had been handed down in the female line for generations, but was never used We were crawling over ourselves like rats in our little cottage, so Papa knocked a door in the tower and built the rest of the house around the base. Unfortunately, it looks nothing like a castle More like …" She closed her eyes and remembered the years of schooltime ridicule she had borne "… a shoe."

"A shoe."

The way he said it made Sunday chuckle despite herself "Between Tuesday's fate and our house, it seems that shoes are a recurring theme in my life."

"And what of your other sisters?"

Sunday folded her book across her stomach and stretched out in a patch of fading sunlight on the moss-covered ground. "Wednesday is the poet. She's been sucking Fairy Joy's absinthe since she was old enough to hold a pen."

"Fairy Joy?"

"Our godmother." The sun was warm on her weary bones, and the conversation was low and comfortable. Sunday smiled and wished she could stay there forever "Thursday always had itchy feet. She ran off with a Pirate King when she was about my age, but she still sends us letters and gifts from time to time Friday is the best of us all, and spends most of her days at the church helping the orphans and the elderly. Saturday is the sturdy, practical one. She goes into the Wood every morning with Papa and Jackie and helps with the cutting."

"And you're ungrateful."

The laugh that burst from Sunday's lips surprised her. It was a curious thing, having one's words thrown back like that She turned to Grumble and propped her head in one hand "'Bonny and blithe and good and gay,'" she recited. "Who could live up to that? And even if they could, what sort of tapioca-pudding life would that be? I told Mama I would much prefer an interesting life to a happy one. She called me ungrateful, and so I am."

"And you are a writer, like you sister."

"Well, I'm not quite so melancholy gravy as Wednesday, Our Lady of Perpetual Shadow … but yes, a little in my own way."

"You have a gift for words," said Grumble.

"A curse more like," Sunday sighed. "Mama says I spend too much of my life in little fantasy worlds and not enough time in this one. And speaking of time," the pool of sunlight had long since faded and the night breeze was cool on her skin, "I should be getting back home before I am missed."

"Will you come again tomorrow?" Grumble said as she sat up "Please?"

"I will try." She ran her fingers through her hair in an effort to dislodge the bits of twigs and grass that had used her head as a playground.

"And … Sunday?"

"Yes?"

"Would you kiss me before you go?"

It hadn't worked yesterday; it would no doubt fail again today Sunday felt terrible for her new friend But his little heart held more hope than most people had in a lifetime, and who was she to belittle that? "Of course," she said, and leaned down to kiss his back "Good night, Grumble."

"Good night, Sunday."

"Grumble? Are you here?" Sunday carefully tiptoed around the crumbled pieces of the well in search of her friend. She knew she was earlier than usual, and she didn't know if Grumble went elsewhere or hid under the well water in the heat of the day. The rocks were perspiring more than Sunday was, and she slipped. She threw her arms out in an effort to catch herself—the last thing she wanted to do was squash the only friend she had—and after tilting about madly for a moment she regained her balance

There was a deep, rumbling croak to her left The little scamp was laughing at her!

"Caught that, did you?"

"Yes," he answered, "though I was afraid for a moment you wouldn't."

Sunday sat down on a more level section of ground. "Grace was not my virtue, remember?"

"So true, so true." He hopped closer. "I didn't expect you until later."

"This was the only time I could get away," she told him as she pulled her little book out of her pocket. "I'm supposed to be accompanying Trix to market to sell the cow, which means my chores will no doubt take up the rest of the day."

"Will your brother be all right by himself?"

That wasn't what she was worried about. "He knows exactly where to go, to whom he's supposed to sell the cow, and what price he's to fetch. He'll be fine." Sunday ran her thumb across the pages of the book. "I didn't have time to write anything for you. I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry too," said Grumble after a moment. "There is something about your stories, your words, your voice. They make me remember. What it was like to be a man."

She was a terrible friend. How selfish of her to have ever imagined that he asked for her company simply to humor her. "Are you in danger of forgetting?"

"I've already forgotten faces and names," he said forlornly, "my own included. I've forgotten what it's like to get out of bed in the morning. The feel of clothes on my skin. Food. I think I loved food once."

Her heart went out to him.

"When I'm lost in your words," he continued, "I forget that I am a frog. Instead I am just a man, sitting here with his beautiful friend, listening to her tell him about her interesting life. It's a wonderful feeling."

Sunday bit her lip. It was the loveliest thing anyone had ever said to her in her whole entire life.

"I'm afraid you have ruined me, Sunday. I didn't realize how much I longed for the company of others until I had your words. And when they are gone … the nights are darker without them. The silence is loud and bottomless, and I am empty. I miss them, my beloved Sunday. I miss you."

It was no use fighting. The tears came anyway. She was powerless to break his spell, but she could give him what she had. She opened her book to the next blank page and started writing. When she was done, she leaned back and smiled at her friend. "'Sunday was nothing,'" she read aloud, "'until she met Grumble—a beautiful man, with the soul of a poet. He was her best friend in the whole wide world, and she loved him with all her heart.'" She closed book gently in her lap. "I wish—"

"Sunday!" Her name was yelled loudly, from far away.

Trix? What was he doing back so soon? He should have been gone another hour or two at least.

"Suuuuun-daaaaaay." Trix called through the woods.

"I'm here!" she called back. "Well," she said to Grumble, "like it or not, you're about to meet some of my family."

"It will be an honor," said the frog.

Trix came crashing through the brush and stumbled into the clearing. "Cooooooool," he said breathlessly. "A Fairy Well." For all that he was at least two years her senior, Trix both looked and acted as if he had stopped aging at twelve. Sunday grabbed ahold of his scrawny wrist before he could scamper off across the rocks and break his neck.

"The cow," She reminded him. "You took her to market and sold her that quickly?" It was more of a hope than a question.

Trix's wide grin was unsettling. "I am a lucky tradesman," he announced, "and a shrewd one. I happened upon a man in the woods who was on his way to market for just such a cow."

Sunday's heart that had only moments before soared in her chest sank lower and lower with every word that passed Trix's lips. No. Please, God, no.

"So I sold it to him for these." He opened his palm so she could see what was inside it.

Her heart plummeted into her feet. She was going to throw up. "Beans."

"Magic beans," Trix said proudly. "He was only going to give me one, but I bartered my way up to five. After all, what if one doesn't sprout? Smart thinking, eh?" Trix tucked the beans back in his pocket and patted them. "I figure I can plant them under my treehouse and … Sunday? Are you OK?"

Sunday had stopped breathing. She was a dead woman. Trix was her responsibility, and she had let him go off alone and trade their best cow for… for

"Sunday?" Trix was suddenly worried.

"Mama will kill me," she whispered. "We needed that money, Trixie. How will we eat?"

"You'll see." His voice was filled with childish wonder. "My magic beans will grow, and we will have food forever."

His innocence was as beautiful in its purity as it was frustrating. He didn't understand, and she didn't know how to make him. "Beans take time to grow," Sunday explained. "What will we eat tomorrow? And the next day?"

At least that much seemed to sink in. "I'm sorry, Sunday," he said quietly. "I don't want you to die."

"If I may be so bold."

In her misery, Sunday had completely forgotten about Grumble. He was sitting patiently beside a perfectly round, slime-covered rock.

"Forgive me, Trix, meet my friend Grumble. Grumble, this is my brother Trix."

"Wow," said Trix.

"Charmed," said Grumble.

"Whatcha got there?" Trix sat down unceremoniously beside Grumble and picked up the spherical stone.

"Something I'm hoping will save your sister's life," he said. "A life that's become uncommonly important to me over the last few days."

Frogs must be color-blind after all, Sunday decided. It was a sweet gesture. To Grumble, the ball must have looked like a precious gem, or a fairy trinket, or

"Gold!" cried Trix.

"What?" Sunday snatched the ball out of her brother's hand. She was so unprepared for the weight of it, she almost dropped it. She scraped at the scum with her fingernail to the smooth, hard surface beneath. "It is!" She hugged the bauble to her.

And then she remembered that she wasn't a hoarding kobold.

Sunday held the ball back out to Grumble.

"We can't take this."

"Sunday, I'm a frog. What use have I for such a pretty?"

"But its worth alone."

"That and a hundred more like it wouldn't get me what I want," he reminded her. "But if it buys even a second of your family's happiness, then to me it is worth more than any moneylender could possibly exchange for it."

He was right, she knew. But her conscience still wouldn't let her. Sunday stood there, weighing her needs against her morals.

They both weighed about three pounds of solid gold.

"Please," said Grumble.

Sunday put the bauble in her pocket. She cradled Grumble in her hands and kissed him heartily before he could ask her. "Thank you, my dear friend, more than you will ever know." He was too stunned for words. "Trix and I should be going now," she said. "But I will come back tomorrow. And I will write for you, I promise!"

She did not hear him say goodbye.

Excited, Sunday skipped in Trix's wake back through the brush. They raced each other to the edge of the Wood, to where their house lay on the horizon. Their energy spent, they slowed to a walk, the weight of the golden ball knocking reassuringly between Sunday's book and her leg.

"He loves you."

Trix was like that. Full of snails and puppy dog's tails one minute, and unnaturally wise the next. What he said was true, but it did not change the way of the world.

"And you love him."

Nor did that.

Sunday covered the lump in her skirt pocket with her hand and said the only thing she could think to say

"I know."

Sunday awoke to a poke in the side and opened her eyes to see her mother looming over her bed. Seven Woodcutter was not a soft, warm, cookie-making type of mother. She was more of a "spoil the rod" type of mother. At least she wasn't using the rod to wake up her children. Anymore.

Sunday felt the familiar rustle of pages under her cheek. Her family's celebration over their newfound wealth had lasted well into the night, and she had fallen asleep committing the revelry to paper so that she could share it with Grumble in the morning. She knew he would be delighted to hear it.

Her gaze flew to the candlestick beside the bed, and the small stub of candle atop it. Dear, good Friday. She must have come into Sunday's room in the wee hours to snuff it out behind her. Mama always let Sunday have it whenever she discovered a candle burned down to the quick, for it was irrefutable proof that at least some of it had been wasted. Despite the fact that Monday could provide for everything they would ever need, Mama was a pennypincher to the end.

"There's been a Proclamation," Mama said by way of explanation. Great. Royal Proclamations usually meant more work, less food, and the loss of something they had previously taken for granted.

"Prince Rumbold is hosting three balls."

Prince Rumbold. The prince whose fairy godmother had turned the brother Sunday had never known into a dog. The prince who had been reported ill or missing or dead or all three over the past several months. The prince who had evidently been restored to health, rescued, resurrected, or simply rumored about. Whatever the story, the spirit had apparently moved His Evil Highness to throw a ball. So he was pretentious enough to have three, and then announced them to the countryside like anyone cared a fig.

"Good for Prince Rumbold," Sunday rolled over and buried her face in the pillow, her pillow that smelled deliciously of sleep.

Another poke. "The prince is throwing three balls, and all the eligible ladies in the countryside are invited," Mama said. "If you are very good and do all your chores, I will let you go."

"Perfect," Sunday said into the pillow. "I don't want to go."

She felt the pages of her book slip from beneath her cheek. Sunday reached out to grab it, but Mama was too quick.

"You will go into town and sell that little golden bauble," she ordered. Sunday's eyes never left the book she held hostage. Mama had her rapt attention. "In addition to what we normally use, you will buy all the fabric Friday needs to alter dresses for you girls, she is in the kitchen right now making a list. You will do your chores *and* Friday's for the next three days, and then at the end of them, you will attend those balls."

"What does Papa have to say about all this?" Sunday snapped.

"Your father has no say in this. Every eligible girl in the country has been asked to attend, which means that every eligible man of means will find a way to be invited. I don't care if it is that awful prince's doing. This may be my girls' only chance to snare a decent husband, and they will not pass up that chance. I will see at least one of you engaged before the week is out. Do I make myself clear?"

Sunday nodded silently as Mama slipped the book into her pocket. It would have been impossible for her to not feel Sunday's desperation.

"Sunday," Mama said more easily, "it's not that difficult. Just do what I need you to do, and I will let you have your diary back before you go to bed every night. But I will take it away again every morning, understand?"

"Yes, Mum!" Sunday hopped out of bed, unable to dress and run to market fast enough.

The trip to market was unbelievable. Sunday was treated like a princess from the moment she arrived at the moneylender's office. He had smiled at the bauble and told her that he was going to have to consult with someone about it, but as he did not want to keep her from shopping he gave her tokens with the royal seal on them and instructed her to leave one with each vendor she purchased goods from. After Trix's misfortune she was wary about trading for a handful of anything, but the vendors lit up at the sight of the tokens and made sure to present to her the finest of their wares. She was probably still a little too frugal with her purchases, even though she had to hire a wagon to help her home with them, she still had a small bag full of gold pieces left over.

Once at home she immediately went to work on her chores. Mama was so pleased with her that she handed Sunday her book directly after supper. While Sunday regretted not being able to spend even a moment with her new best friend, she had experienced the entire day with an eye for how she would tell Grumble all about it. He would be so happy to see her, and she would read to him for hours, and he would understand why she hadn't come.

The next two days passed in a blur. The only moments that seemed to drag were the rare occasions that Sunday had to gaze longingly at the treeline of the Wood. She missed her friend more with every hour that she was away, and she hoped he was not desperately pining for her.

Though if her feelings were any judge, he undoubtedly was.

At the end of the third day, Sunday sat in front of the mirror in a gown of silver and tried not to fall asleep while Wednesday braided her hair.

"The words," said Wednesday dreamily. (Wednesday said everything dreamily.) "They're keeping you up at night." If anyone understood the power of words, it was Wednesday.

"Yes," Sunday admitted.

"It shows."

That was less than reassuring.

"But don't worry," her dark sister added. "You look like …" her voice floated off into the ether. She wove a ribbon into the plait. "You still look beautiful."

Papa said nothing as he watched his women climb inside the carriage. He twisted the small gold medallion on the chain around his neck; Sunday had come by her nervous idle hands honestly. She suddenly wished she had her book with her to keep her company. To give her courage.

Papa had tears in his eyes when he looked at Sunday. She felt miserable. Like she was betraying him by even attending the ball. Like she was betraying Grumble.

Once at the palace they walked up the steps and across the yard to where the gaggle of other women were waiting to be announced at the Grand Entrance. Sunday was sure that the Woodcutter women made an odd picture. Mama was humble in her matronly mauve. Friday almost skipped in her scarlet. Saturday lumbered in her lavender, her flat footed gait betraying the fact that she hated wearing a dress more than anything in the world, and that she would have preferred a death sentence to what awaited beyond those doors. Wednesday glided, a waif in her fairy-kissed gray, as if she were wearing her own shadow. And Sunday in her silver walked next to them, feeling more the pretender and betrayer with every step that she took.

Sunday didn't realize she had no idea what she was getting into until she walked through the doors of the Grand Entrance and stood on the landing overlooking the ballroom floor.

It was more people than she had ever seen in her life.

Her breath caught in her throat. Her face flushed. Her heart raced. She froze in place, unable to take another step forward. She felt Wednesday's cool hand slip inside her clammy one, and it gave her the courage to move forward to the top of the red-carpeted stairs. She immediately saw herself plummeting down them.

Wednesday squeezed her fingers.

"Missus Seven Woodcutter," the servant announced, "and her daughters: Miss Wednesday, Miss Friday, Miss Saturday, and Miss Sunday Woodcutter."

Sunday wouldn't have been surprised if the whole room had turned to laugh at their ridiculous names. Thank God there were only four of them. She picked up her skirts in one hand and held

fast to Wednesday with the other, letting her sister ease her slowly down the steps.

She was happy to see a familiar face meet them at the bottom, smiling behind a jewel-studded fan.

"Monday," Mama crooned as she embraced her eldest daughter. Sunday's eyes never left the fan. So much nonsense over a stupid cow that wasn't worth half of the useless accessory her sister currently held nonchalantly in her hand. But Mama's pride kept her from taking any charity from Monday, and they were all better off for it. As she reminded them. Daily.

Sunday's princess sister took her hand from Wednesday's and looked her over. Sunday bowed her head in a small curtsey.

"She looks like Tuesday," Monday said to Mama.

Mama turned. Sunday thought it might have been the first time in her life her mother had actually *looked* at her. "She does, a little," Mama said after a pause.

Sunday's racing heart tripped over itself and skipped a beat in the process. It was the nicest thing her mother had ever said to her. The music stopped. The room went quiet. Sunday was too shocked to notice anything, until she realized that her family were staring at a point just to the left of her head. Behind her.

"Miss Woodcutter," he said.

Sunday turned slowly, and uttered the first words that came to mind that were not profane. "Your Highness."

"Would you do me the honor of accompanying me in the next dance?"

From a man like him, it was a rhetorical question. Sunday straightened out of her curtsey and took his hand as he led her to the center of the room. She stared at the gold medal on his breast, afraid to look at him.

She did not think the prince was simply a shallow man with an eye for a pretty face; there were many girls much prettier than she in the room. He must have known of their connection. Even if he had been too young to remember it, surely he must have heard the legend of Jack Junior. Perhaps this was his way of mending ways between their families. Perhaps this was his way of demonstrating that he always got what he wanted. Perhaps this was a display of his complete and utter ignorance.

The band started a waltz.

Oh why me, Sunday repeated to herself with every movement. *Oh why me, oh why me, oh why me . . .* over and over again as they turned in the sea of beautiful people, over and over again until she slipped and said it aloud.

"Why?" said the prince. "Well, because I needed to ask someone a question, and you looked intelligent enough to answer it honestly."

"As you wish, Your Highness." It was a knee-jerk reaction to curtsey at the title, and Sunday found herself stumbling. The prince spun her around to cover up the misstep.

"My fault," he said quickly. "So, are you ready for my question?"

She nodded sternly.

"Do I look as stupid as I feel?"

Sunday bit her lips together and tried not to laugh. One did not laugh at His Royal Highness. After a count of three, she felt calm enough to reply. "It would not matter if Your Highness was wearing a sackcloth," she said. "Or nothing at all. No one would ever think you looked stupid, and if they did they would not be traitorous enough to say so."

"Exactly," said the prince. "Which is why I am asking you. I think myself a relatively good judge of character, and I have a feeling that you are the type of person who does not lie casually."

"In that case," said Sunday, "you look fine. Very smart. Very handsome. As a prince should look. Although . . ."

"Tell me."

"There is a bit of your hair sticking out on the left side."

"I knew it!" the prince said through his teeth. "Damn nuisance. There is no help for it."

"I'm sure if you smoothed it down with your hand quickly, no one would notice."

"You said it yourself, Miss Woodcutter. Everyone is looking. Everyone would notice, and they would all say I was too vain for my own good."

"I would do it for you," offered Sunday, "but everyone would say I was too familiar."

The prince threw back his head and laughed loudly. Sunday tensed in his arms as she felt every eye in the room turn to them in wonder. She was instantly reminded of her place in the world. Perhaps it was a good thing. She had been feeling entirely too comfortable with this man who was supposed to be her enemy. She felt her cheeks turn instantly red, which no doubt sent more tongues wagging.

"I love that you blush."

"Why did you do that?" Sunday whispered.

"Because everyone was looking," he said, "and now everyone is gossiping. Everyone already assumes that you are too familiar, so you must dance every dance with me after this. And in order to save yourself the humiliation of being seen dancing with a lunatic all night, you have no choice but to fix my hair."

He smiled in triumph.

"Scoundrel." Sunday reached out a hand and coaxed his dark hair back behind his ear.

Half the room gasped.

Sunday didn't care.

That night in bed, Sunday wrote about her very long day, about her dress and the people at the ball. She wrote about her sisters and their escapades. She wrote that she had made a friend, and that she had danced every dance. But she did not mention the prince to Grumble, to what would be Grumble when she saw him again. It pained her to not be able to speak of the happiness that brimmed to overflowing inside her, but she did not feel comfortable mentioning this man to her best friend. This man who was a man, and not a frog. This man who was not just a man, but a prince. A prince who was her father's sworn enemy.

A prince she was falling in love with.

The next day started so much like the one before it that it took Sunday a while to realize the previous night hadn't been a dream. She awoke to her mother yanking the book out from beneath her head and scolding her for letting the candle burn down. Sunday yawned and rose to get started on her chores … and then noticed the silver dress in the corner. She clasped her pillow to her breast and allowed herself two gluttonous minutes of dancing around the room before she sobered and took the dress downstairs for Friday to alter for the night's festivities.

Saturday "injured" herself in the Wood that day, and she limped around the house quite convincingly until Mama caved and told her she did not have to go to the ball. The hired carriage was a little less cramped that night, and Sunday thought Papa seemed happier to have one of his girls stay behind to keep him company. He still looked at Sunday wistfully as she mounted the carriage steps, and she wondered if it was her resemblance to Tuesday that made him sad, or if he could see through her skin to her traitorous heart.

Friday had done wonders retrimming Sunday's dress with gold. Wednesday's with blue, and hers and Mama's with pieces of silver from Sunday's the night before. But this night was different, and there were so many people at the palace that the Woodcutter women were instantly swept up in the crowd and separated from each other as soon as they alighted from the carriage. Sunday called out to her mother and sisters, but she could not hear them above the din of the voices that surrounded her. Her heart began to race again, and goosebumps rose up on her skin. She looked around frantically.

The two girls next to her turned … and snarled.

Sunday didn't see who landed the first punch, the one that connected with her stomach and made her double over as she struggled to regain her wind. She could not tell how many hands tore at her ribbons and ripped her dress to shreds, she only heard their shrieks like wild animals above the rending of fabric. Someone's pointed slipper connected with her ribs, and she knew that if she did not

stand, she would surely be killed. Her cheek was scratched, and soot was rubbed into her hair and pushed into her mouth. Somehow she blindly made her way to a wall of the castle, found a door, and fell inside the kitchen to safety

One scullery maid bolted the door, while another sat Sunday down by the fire and held a damp cloth to her wounds Sunday begged a third not to tell the prince. Which she could only assume is exactly what the girl did once she passed out.

Words and small images came and went through Sunday's consciousness She was lifted up into strong arms, and a fresh dress was ordered for her. She was changed and tidied and her wounds were tended to by women with soft hands who sounded like silk and smelled of lilacs. She was taken to a place where nightingales sang in the trees above and the sounds of a party could be heard floating in the distance on the cool night air.

Sunday awoke with her head on soft velvet, her hand covering a royal gold medal

"They will only hate me more for making you miss your own ball," she said to the prince from his shoulder.

"The hellions should be grateful I did not call off the evening altogether. I have never seen such savagery."

"The female of the species … " Sunday chuckled, and her ribs suddenly regretted it.

"It is my fault for singling you out."

"It is my fault for wanting to be singled out," Sunday fought back, "and the curse of an interesting life There are very good times and very bad times. Black and white. Things aren't usually nice shades of gray. Tonight was the price I paid for having such a wonderful time yesterday "

"Do not attempt to justify their actions," said the prince "You deserve better From all of us." He smoothed her hair with his hand, and she was too weary and too selfish to tell him to stop "This will not happen again tomorrow."

Sunday lifted her head from the prince's shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "There can be no tomorrow, surely you realize that."

"There will be. I will send a carriage at sundown, and my guardsmen will accompany you and your family to the Entrance. You have my word, no harm will come to you."

But that's not it at all, she wanted to tell him Don't you see how far I am beneath you? Don't you see that my family doesn't have enough money to afford three dresses for each of their daughters for a ball every night? Don't you remember that I'm a Woodcutter, and that your evil fairy godmother turned my brother into a dog and my father will never give me permission to … to

She let the manic words winnow away to nothing. Her heart was gone, she had betrayed her friend and her family, and whatever happened, happened.

"Thank you "

"And now," said the prince as he lifted her into his arms, "I will send you home to rest. I will go back to the party and tell your mother that you have fallen ill with fatigue as a result of the crowd."

He was good; that wasn't entirely a lie. "I can walk, you know."

He ignored Sunday's protests "And then I will woo your mother and dance with your sisters all night until every other woman in the room is green with envy."

She swatted his shoulder "Beast."

He sat her down gently in the carriage and kissed her hand.

"Good night, my Sunday."

"Good night, my prince."

The house was dark when Sunday arrived home, and she was grateful. She quietly and carefully climbed the stairs to her tower room and eased the new dress over her bruised body She threw back the covers of her bed and saw her book, small and lonely on the pillow.

But Sunday could not bring herself to write the words.

She turned her face into the pillow and cried herself to sleep

When Mama poked Sunday awake the next morning, she screamed

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "You startled me."

"You have more to be sorry for than that. You started quite the scandal, disappearing off with the prince last night."

"I was . ill."

"So ill you ruined your dress?" Mama scoffed. "Don't lie to me, Sunday. It isn't you." Sunday opened her mouth, but Mama held up a hand. "Don't tell me the truth either, because I don't want to lie to your father. Just tell me this. Are you in love with him?"

"Yes." All Sunday's torment filled up that one word and spilled over the sides.

"That's what I was afraid of "

And then the strangest thing happened.

Mama softened.

"Come with me, child."

Sunday followed her mother down the tower steps to her parents room in the main house. Mama led her to the trunk at the end of her bed, a fixture for so long Sunday had forgotten it was there She pulled off the quilts and pillows that were stacked on top of it, and the lid creaked as she pried open the long-neglected hinges.

Inside the trunk was a box, and inside the box was a dress of silver and gold, the most beautiful dress Sunday had ever seen.

"It was Tuesday's gift from Fairy Joy," Mama said after a prolonged and reverent silence, "for when she danced at her wedding." There was a hitch in her voice. "She never got to wear it." She looked up at me with damp eyes. "I think she would want you to have it."

The world around her clicked, and Sunday saw what was really going on, what Mama was really saying.

Seven for a secret never to be told.

Just as the things Sunday wrote came true, things Mama said came true. She had stopped having children after seven daughters She had called Trix a member of the family and he was, and it never occurred to anyone to think differently She had called Sunday ungrateful … and everyone knew how successfully *that* had developed. It was Mama who had said the shoes would never wear out, and in doing so she had cursed her own daughter to death. It was Mama who had said that one of her daughters would be engaged by the end of the week, and so cursed Sunday as well.

It wasn't Tuesday who wanted Sunday to have the dress, it was Mama

Sunday hugged her mother tightly "It's beautiful, Mama."

Seven Woodcutter put her awkward arms around her youngest daughter. "I love you, Sunday. No matter what happens."

For once, Mama didn't have to say it for Sunday to know it was true.

Mama, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday were all ready when the prince's carriage arrived at sunset.

This time, her father was not at the door to watch them leave.

When they arrived at the palace, there was no need for an escort, as guards lined the path from the stairs to the Grand Entrance They walked through the doors that opened before them, and when they were announced, the assembly bowed as one.

Sunday had to restrain herself from running down the red-carpeted stairs to take the hand of her prince.

"Don't you think this is a bit much?" she whispered

"No. You look beautiful "

"Thank you."

"Shall we dance?"

The music started up at once, as if the musicians had been waiting the whole time for Sunday's arrival. She could almost feel the collected relief as other dancers began to fill the floor. Sunday and her prince danced countless dances straight before stopping for a breath of fresh air on the prince's private balcony. He immediately sent his servant for wine and refreshment

"I hated letting you go last night," he said as soon as they were alone. "The party wasn't the same without you."

"I missed you too." The truth hurt just as badly when spoken aloud. This was all too painful, and she had to put a stop to it. She wondered, after so long, if Grumble even remembered her, but she had betrayed her father long enough

"Your Highness—"

"My friends call me Rumbold."

Sunday could not let herself sink deeper into the mire by addressing him so familiarly.

"Sunday," he asked softly, "will you be my friend?"

He was killing her. "*Your Highness*, we can't be anything. This can't go on any longer. Surely you know who I am, who my family is."

"The past is past," he said. "Can't we put it behind us?"

How could he shrug off such a tragedy so lightly? He didn't know the impact her brother's fate had had on her family. He couldn't have. For all his princely life, locked up in his ivory tower, Sunday could see that he was blissfully unaware of the exact situation. She was determined to clear the air between them.

She held up a hand to his mouth. "Please, let me finish." He said nothing, only began to kiss her fingers and she was forced to concentrate. "I am a *Woodcutter*," she said, determined to make him understand. "Sunday *Woodcutter*."

"And you're ungrateful," he finished. "I already know that part."

Sunday blinked, and all the familiar words finally hit home. The world spun around her, and for the second time that night it clicked—slammed—horribly into focus.

Grumble.

Rumbold.

The prince hadn't been off on holiday, he had been enchanted.

That last kiss had broken the spell.

The trading of the golden bauble for royal tokens, him picking her out of the crowd only seconds after her arrival at the ball on the first night.

He had been in love with her the whole time.

Prince Rumbold's eyes twinkled and he kissed her fingers again.

Oh, she was such a fool.

A dog's faraway howl at the moonlight snapped her out of her shock, and she turned and fled.

This time the hellion horde worked in her favor; they were all too eager to see her leave, and all too happy to mob the prince and slow his pursuit. Sunday heard her sisters' voices calling after her, but she did not stop for them. She did not stop for anyone, until she met Trix on the carriage way. He was sitting on the steps there, as if he had been waiting for her.

"Come," he told her. "I will run with you."

She didn't think to tell him it was no use, that the prince would no doubt have his horse saddled and overtake them, that he would release the hounds and they would nip at their heels until he arrived. She followed Trix through the fields and the scrub woods, until the baying and the hoofbeats were almost upon them.

They stopped beside a small pond.

"They will catch us," Sunday said to Trix.

"We will hide," said Trix.

"How?"

"You have to believe," he told her. "Just like when you write, or Mama speaks. If you believe we can hide, we will be hidden."

Sunday grabbed her brother's hands, closed her eyes, and believed with all her might. She believed so hard that when the prince slowed his horse by the pond, she believed he did not see a woman in a gold and silver dress and her wild brother, only a tree with gold and silver rosebuds on it and a rock beside it. She believed that he sat on the rock and buried his head in his hands, and that when his shoulders shook he was not laughing. She believed that he stood up, plucked a rose from the tree, and rode back off toward the palace. And when he was gone, she believed that Trix stood up and cracked his sore back, and that she ran beside him, half barefoot, all the way home and into her father's arms.

Sunday woke the next morning and put on her nicest gown, for though she had made peace with her family, she knew that she wouldn't be able to run from the prince.

Papa did not go out to the Wood that morning, and Mama limited her daughters' chores to tasks around the house. They would all be there for Sunday when Prince Rumbold came.

His carriage arrived shortly after breakfast.

The Woodcutters met him outside, under Trix's tree.

Prince Rumbold bowed to Papa. "Sir, I have come to heal the breach between our families."

Papa did not bow in return. "You have taken my son from me," he said. "You will not take my daughter as well."

"Forgive me, sir, but your son's refusal to return home had nothing to do with me."

"You killed him." Papa face turned red and hard. "Your murdering family cursed him and killed him."

Prince Rumbold did not back down. "The *wolf* killed him, sir. Not anyone from my family. When I returned his medallion to you, I hoped that the ill will would end there." He clasped his hands behind his back. "I see it did not."

"Now see here ..." Papa's words were punctuated by spittle as his anger grew.

Mama laid a calm hand on Papa's breast and stepped toward the prince.

"Wolf?" The word barely had enough strength behind it to push its way from her reluctant mouth. "What wolf?"

"If you please, mum. I only know the story as I lived it, and even that can be tainted by the ever-changing memories of a young boy. Your son killed the dog my father gave me for my birthday, and for his penance, my fairy godmother cursed him to serve in the dog's place for a period of one year. In return, *his* fairy godmother placed a curse on *me*, that upon my eighteenth birthday I would live as an amphibian for the same period of time," he smiled at Sunday, "a period that was most happily shortened by a certain maiden and her kiss of true love."

"A year?" That certainly wasn't part of any of the stories and songs Sunday had ever heard. "Papa, is this true?"

"He was turned into a dog," said Papa, "and he never returned home."

"After a year, Jack returned to human form and was allowed to stay at the castle to recover. Knowing that I would one day share his fate, to some extent, I approached him. My desire for knowledge overrode my fear of him. He admired my youthful bravery, and we became friends."

"Lies!" shouted Papa. "Why should we believe any of this?"

"Because I know things about Jack that others could not know," said the prince, "things he would not have confided to anyone who was not a true friend. That medallion for instance."

Papa pulled the medallion from beneath his shirt almost unconsciously.

"Jack was born a sickly child, and it was thought that he would not survive his infancy. But on his nameday, his fairy godmother gifted him with that medallion, so that it might give him strength."

Papa's eyes were wide; his jaw clenched tightly.

"Surely that is something only a confidant would know. Certainly not someone who was your son's enemy."

Papa seemed eager to speak at that, but Mama's hand still remained firmly on his chest.

"A year," Mama encouraged Prince Rumbold to continue.

"Jack was released from my family's household fourteen years ago," said Prince Rumbold, "and he continued about his adventures and heroics, his flights of fancy and feats of unsurpassed bravery. His last valiant effort came about saving a young girl from a wolf ... which he did. But not before the wolf claimed his prize. I myself sliced open the wolf's belly. The medallion was all that remained. And so I returned it to you, sir, explaining everything. You obviously received it."

Sunday imagined she looked much as her sisters did at the present moment—mouth agape and brows furrowed in confusion.

But none of them could compare to the sheer stillness that Seven Woodcutter had become, her silence almost tangible in the

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BLOOD OF VIRGINS

TO THE YOUNG IT CAN SEEM LIKE DANGER LURKS EVERYWHERE, AND MAYBE IT DOES. BUT SHOULD YOU TRADE YOUR SELF-ESTEEM FOR SECURITY?

I REMEMBER RIDING THE DRAGON THAT FIRST WEEK OF COLLEGE.

Some kids in my high school had dragons, but none of those kids would ever give me a ride. So I was flattered when Matt, one of the guys in my new dorm, said he was taking his dragon out to the supermarket and asked if I wanted to come.

That day Matt wore loafers, cargo shorts, and a short-sleeved yellow shirt. Sunglasses perched atop his wavy brown hair. He led me out of our dorm and across the yard to the stables. His black dragon lay coiled in a stall, chained to the cement. A padlock dangled from its collar.

Matt used his key and the collar clanged to the floor. The dragon unfurled and slithered to the yard, everything about it gaunt. Built into its spine were two seats, one behind the other. Matt placed his shoe on the dragon's shoulder, a fist-shaped protrusion of bone, and swung into the driver's seat.

The dragon circled me, watching me with eyes the color of blood. Its face was skeletal, as if the manufacturer hadn't had enough skin to give it cheeks or lips. You could always see its teeth, like black swords, even when its jaws were fully closed. I hesitated.

Matt said, "Come on. What are you afraid of?"

"They drink blood," I said simply. That seemed sufficient reason to show caution.

"Of virgins," he said. "You're not a virgin, right?" As if that was unthinkable.

I chuckled and said, "No." Though I was.

BY DAVID BARR KIRTLEY • ILLUSTRATION BY HUAN TRAN

"Then come on. I have to be back for class at 2:30."

I clambered up the dragon's flank and slid into the passenger seat, which was upholstered with leather and smelled new. I pulled the straps down over my chest and connected them to the belt around my waist.

Matt yanked the reins. The dragon shot up, like we'd been catapulted. My stomach heaved. Wind smacked my face. The dragon's wings exploded on either side, great black sails that filled the sky. I clenched the straps and knew I'd made a mistake in coming. The dragon scared me.

I gazed down longingly. To our right, the Pacific, white foam dancing on lazy turquoise swells. A narrow bike path wound along the beach. To our left, a placid tangle of palm-lined residential streets.

Matt said, "How you doing?"

It seemed that he wanted me to admit that his dragon frightened me, so instead I said, "Great."

Other dragons cavorted on the airy currents. Those dragons were cherry red or lime green or creamy brown. Their riders steered them up the beach, or inland toward the mall, or back to campus.

A slender girl on a pink dragon passed us going the opposite way, her blond hair billowing. Matt waved to her. He said over his shoulder, "I met that girl last night. Hold on, I want to say hi." He yanked the reins and we banked sharply. My stomach lurched. We swept around in an arc and came up alongside the girl. Her dragon had the guileless beady eyes and scrunched up cheeks of a lap dog. Matt said, "Hi. Dora, right?"

"Deirdre," she corrected. "And you're . . . Matt?" He grinned, and she said, "I like your dragon."

"Thanks. It's new." He pointed. "See how the spine bends? It can pull off turns like nothing else." He paused, then nodded at me. "This is Chris. He lives in my building."

"Hi." She looked at me, appraising. "It's fabulous up here, don't you think? So liberating."

"Yeah, I love flying," I lied.

She asked me, "What kind of dragon do you have?"

"Oh, I don't have one." Me, embarrassed. "I mean, not yet."

And she said, "Oh."

Later, I would remember everything about that moment. The slant of her head, the pursing of her lips. Her eyes were very green. I remembered every angle of her face, every line of cheek and jaw.

We all flew back to campus together, the supermarket forgotten. Her name forgotten too, by Matt, within hours. (It was Deirdre.) I remembered. Though it was him she went off with afterward, to watch their dragons play together on the quad. I saw her a few more times, around campus, but she didn't recognize me, or pretended not to. I remembered that "Oh" so vividly. I think, because it was the last word she ever said to me, after I told her I had no dragon.

TWO WEEKS AFTER THAT RIDE, I WAS LEAVING MY

sociology class when a flyer on a bulletin board caught my eye: a photocopied dragon from a magazine ad, and printed below it in large block letters, BLOOD ON OUR HANDS? THE HUMAN COST OF DRAGONS. Below that: Presented by the Campus Greens. At 8:00 that night in a room across the hall. I decided to attend.

I tried to get other people to go. Everyone said they had too much work, though I knew they'd spend the evening watching TV. No one cared.

I stopped Matt in the hall on his way to the bathroom. I said, "Come on, it's about dragons. That's like your favorite topic."

He scowled. "It's *against* dragons. I've got better things to do than spend an hour listening to some hippie chick complain that the world's not fair."

"Aren't you curious what they'll say?"

"You can tell me all about it when you get back." The bathroom door closed behind him.

So I went alone, and slipped into a chair at the back of the small auditorium. Out of sixty seats, only a dozen were taken. I guessed that the knot of five students in the first row were the Campus Greens. Beside the podium hung a movie screen. Finally, at 8:15, when it was clear no stragglers would arrive, one the Greens stood and faced the crowd.

Matt would have snickered then, I was sure, would have whispered, "I called it," if he'd bothered to come. The girl's mildly fuzzy brown hair fell past her waist. She wore heavy black shoes, glasses with thick oval frames, and a homemade skirt of stitched-together red and blue and purple. A hippie chick. Matt would have laughed, but in her own way she was beautiful.

She said, "Hello everyone, and thank you all for coming. My name is Miranda. I'm president of the Campus Greens. We're here tonight to talk about the human cost of dragons and dragon riding." Her voice was stronger and clearer than I'd expected. "Dragons drink blood," she said. "Blood of virgins. Corporations tell us that the blood trade provides income for many people in poorer countries and also promotes morality. What they don't tell us is that donors are paid pennies per pint and often work in tragic conditions." She nodded to a friend, and the lights dimmed. A film played. "This video was shot by a hidden camera at a bloodshop in Malaysia. Some of the images are disturbing. I'm sorry to have to show this, but to really understand you need to see the images for yourself."

The camera was jumpy, often pointed at a grimy wall or floor, but we saw enough. Filth-covered little girls with brown skin and matted black hair wearing shifts that had once been white. Buckets overflowing with urine and feces. Dark infected sores around syringes still taped in place. Tables piled high with plastic bags full of blood.

Miranda spoke more, about the need for new laws, about how dragons guzzle blood by the gallon while people all over the world die from lack of transfusions, but I barely heard her. The images of those little girls stayed with me.

Afterward, in a moment when Miranda stood alone, I approached her and said, "Hi. I'm Chris."

"Oh, hi." She was shy suddenly, in a way she hadn't been while addressing the crowd. "I'm Miranda."

I said, "I thought your remarks were really good. Really important. I can't believe more people didn't come."

She smiled faintly. "You're new here?"

"Yeah, it's my first semester."

She gathered her belongings. "This was actually a pretty good turnout. It's not the most politically active student body." We chatted about that, then about classes. Her shyness faded. Finally, as her friends headed for the exit, she told me, "Our group meets at this same time every week, just next door."

I said, "I'll try to make it."

"Great." She smiled again, and her gaze lingered. "Chris, right?" I confirmed this, and she said, "OK, bye," and joined her friends.

So I started attending the Campus Greens meetings. Seven or eight people usually came, and we sat around in a circle in a classroom. Many people aired ambitious proposals, but Miranda was really looking for something more practical.

At my third meeting, I spoke up. "OK, how about this? What if we all pledge not to ride any dragons for a month? We can walk into town and carry back any supplies we need. And we do it as a group, publicly. If we show everyone that it's possible to survive at college without a dragon, then maybe more people will decide not to buy them."

Miranda studied me, then glanced around the circle and said, "That's good. I like that."

Seven people showed up for the first walk. A photographer took our picture for the school paper. We walked into town along the bike path, ate at a Mexican restaurant on the beach, and went food shopping. Four people showed up for the second walk, but one guy said he couldn't afford to eat out again, so we just walked and shopped and went home. For a while after that just three of us came: Miranda, me, and a girl who never talked named either Stacy or Tracy. (I was never sure.)

Then Stacy or Tracy stopped coming too, and it was just Miranda and me. Not much of a group, but I was happy to spend time alone with her. She was easy to talk to, and knew everything. She was even surprisingly funny, once she overcame her shyness. And she was deep. Sometimes when she spoke of Andrea Dworkin or Edna St. Vincent Millay I would feel like a fraud, as if I'd maybe once inadvertently said something profound that suggested to her unplumbed depths to my character that didn't actually exist.

On the last night of our walking campaign, Miranda and I sat on a bench facing the ocean and watched the most beautiful sunset over water I've ever seen, a tableau of yellow and red. Dragons clogged the sky, dozens of them, all black in the twilight. I shifted closer to Miranda, and put my arm around her for the first time. Maybe she thought it was because of the sunset, but really it was because of the dragons. I felt a strange terror that they would descend on me, clawing and biting and swallowing pieces of me, enveloping me in a great slithering sphere. I sought the protection of her touch.

She leaned into me and said, "It's been an interesting month."

The two of us sat alone and dragons filled the sky. I wondered if any of our former companions were up there right now. I said, "Sorry my idea was such a flop."

She tried to be encouraging. "It wasn't a flop." I looked at her dubiously, and she added, "I mean, not a *total* flop."

I chuckled. "Thanks."

She lifted her chin toward mine and smiled. We kissed as the sun vanished. She drew back a few inches and said softly, "See? Not a total flop."

The next morning, Matt and I picked up copies of the school paper on our way into the dining hall. The article about the walking campaign had just come out, and Matt flipped to the photo of the seven original participants. "That's her?"

I hadn't told him I'd kissed her, or even that I wanted to, but either he'd heard or just knew. He said, "You could do a lot better."

I said, "You could do a lot better to shut up," in a somewhat joking way.

That night Miranda slept in my bed. As we settled beneath the blankets, she said, "I want to tell you something. I've never had sex. And I'm not going to, unless it's with someone who really loves me."

I smiled. "Maybe that'll be me."

"Maybe." She kissed me lightly. "We'll see."

I waited a moment, then confessed, "I've never had sex either."

"Really?" she said. I nodded. She squeezed my hand. "I appreciate you telling me."

I joked, "I appreciate you not telling anyone."

"I won't," she said, then grinned mischievously. "Well, maybe just Matt."

"Don't!" I warned her, laughing. And she laughed too, and everything with her was great, for a while.

BUT THEN THE DRAGONS STARTED WATCHING ME.

Most people they ignored, but whenever I passed the stables where they lay chained they would all turn their heads very subtly, keeping me in view of their red eyes. Dragons were everywhere—landing in the yard, playing on the quad, being led down pathways—and everywhere they stared at me. I imagined that they hated me, for opposing them, for tempting them with my innocent's blood. It seemed crazy, but I couldn't shake the feeling. Miranda and I continued our walks, which had become a permanent habit, and the dragons loomed overhead. Miranda wasn't afraid of dragons, and I felt safe with her, but I wondered what the dragons might do if I walked alone.

Miranda subscribed to piles of left-wing newsletters, and I read every article about dragons. Those articles revealed a disturbing pattern that wasn't widely reported: large numbers of accidents involving dragons. Most of the victims were young. Probably virgins.

I began constantly quoting dragon-related statistics. Dragon riders were three times as likely to be injured while traveling, four times as likely to injure others.

Matt just laughed at all this. He and I would stay up half the night arguing, sprawled across cheap sofas in our dorm's basement lounge. He said, "Riding a dragon takes skill. A lot of people don't know what they're doing, but you can't blame the dragons for that."

I said, "You think it's just coincidence that so many of the victims are virgins?"

He said, "Are *you* a virgin?"

"No." My heart raced. I was afraid he'd seen through me.

"Then what do you care?" He was oblivious to my alarm. "It doesn't affect you. It's not your problem."

Miranda and I stayed together for most of the semester, and in that time other people got together, or broke up and got together with other people, or got together with several people and didn't really remember because they'd been drunk, and the small number of virgins dwindled even more. That only emphasized my sense of vulnerability.

Night after night Miranda and I lay together on my bed, kissing and touching and undressing until she said, "OK. That's enough." Then we'd talk until one of us fell asleep. I never voiced my frustration, but I know she sensed it. All she had to do was consent once. I thought, and this huge burden would be lifted forever.

Finally, one night in December I was in a weird mood and felt like I just couldn't take this thing with the dragons another day. Miranda lay beside me in the dark. I brooded in silence a long time, then said, "We've been together almost three months."

A moment passed. She said softly, "Yeah."

And I said, meaningfully, "Yeah."

She rolled onto her side, facing me, forehead cradled in her palm. She looked into my face. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," I said.

She asked, without inflection, "Do you love me?"

Did I love her? I wasn't sure. I enjoyed her company. Admired her. Felt she was beautiful. Thought about her a lot. Hoped all her dreams came true. But would I have strapped on shining steel for her? Taken blade in gauntleted fingers and climbed a misty crag to risk death in the jaws of some black dragon for her?

I didn't think so. I was afraid of dragons.

I said, "I think you're amazing. I think you're beautiful and funny and wonderful."

She said, "That's not what I asked."

I said, "You only want me to say 'I love you'? Just those words and no others?"

"Just answer the question."

I sighed and sat up. "Fine," I said. "Fine. I—"

She interrupted. "Why do you want to do this? Really?"

"What?" I said. "What are you talking about?"

She stared at me. "Does this really have anything to do with your feelings for me at all, or is it just about them?"

Them. The dragons. I said, "You think I only want this because I'm afraid of them?"

She said, "Yeah, sometimes I do."

"Look." I didn't know what to say. "All right, yes, I'm afraid of them, OK? Of course I am. It's scary what they can do to people. I don't want them to hurt me, and I don't want them to hurt you either. We'd both be a lot safer if we did this, but that doesn't mean I don't—"

She stirred and stood up off the bed. "When I do it, it's going to be out of love, not fear."

I said, "Where are you going?"

She picked up her heavy black shoes. "I need time to think."

"Wait," I said, as she crossed the room. "Wait, Miranda."

She opened the door and stood silhouetted. Then she closed the door behind her, leaving me to darkness.

She didn't show up for our walk, so I walked alone. I didn't hear from her all week. I called her a few times, but she didn't answer. After that I didn't know what I'd say if I did see her. I kept doing our

walk, out of some strange loyalty to the memory of us, but I avoided our usual route along the bike path and instead wandered the residential streets, so I wouldn't bump into her

Only one day I did. She was with two friends. She and I passed on the sidewalk with an awkward "Hi " and I realized that she too had decided to avoid the bike path, so after that I switched back to it. The bike path was more exposed to dragons, but I felt too hurt and mixed up just then to care much about dragons.

Later, Matt knocked on my door and asked if I wanted to play frisbee. I told him no. He lingered in the hall. He said, "So, you and Melinda . . ?" He must have heard about it.

"Miranda," I corrected. I sighed. "Yeah."

"Too bad." He gave a sympathetic grimace. "How long were you together? Like a month?"

"Like three."

He nodded. "So did the two of you ever, you know . ?"

"No," I said. And this time his grimace was one of pity, or maybe contempt.

I took my last exam on a Thursday and started packing to go home to Boston for winter break. It was snowing back east, so I decided to take one final walk along the beach. That's when the accident happened.

THE SHADOW. THAT'S HOW IT STARTED.

The sun had been bright but suddenly I felt cold. I raised my eyes from the bike path and saw sunlight receding all around me. A great winged shroud exploded over me. A dragon, descending. It's time, I thought. They're coming for me. I heard faint laughter on the wind.

I ran, arms pumping, loafer soles slapping on pavement. But not far. Teeth grazed my shoulders. My sweatshirt was yanked upward, my collar tugged hard into my throat like a noose. Lifted from the earth, I dangled. The sand sped by below. I heard someone screaming, "No! Stop it! Stop!" My cheek bashed against a monstrous jaw. I was dropped. The foam rushed up. Impact.

I lay on my side. Virgin's blood poured from my nose, then a breaking wave washed away the blood and filled my mouth with salt.

I heard splashing. Something seized my shoulder, rolled me onto my back. I sputtered. Matt's face above me. His hand on my arm. He said, "Chris! I'm sorry. I didn't. I just . "

Behind him, his black dragon coiled, malevolent, watching me. Beachgoers kept their distance from it as they rushed to help. Matt said, "... Just a joke. You've been so jumpy. I was flying low and I saw you and I thought I'd ... but when you ran, it ... it just went. Are you all right?"

I was taken to the hospital. My eye swelled shut, and I had to get a mess of stitches in my back. Matt came to visit me. He kept saying he was sorry. They put down his dragon, but he got another one that he claimed was better behaved, plus, he said, it could pull a 180 in five seconds flat. Then my parents came and took me home to Boston so I could recuperate in the bedroom where I'd grown up.

One morning, when I'd been home two weeks and my eye was mostly healed, my parents came into my room. Mom said, "We've got a surprise for you."

They led me to the backyard. A huge hulking dragon, cerulean blue, slept in the shadow of our elm. A heavy iron chain bound it to the tool shed.

Dad handed me the key. "Your mom and I agreed that it's not safe for you to be just walking around out there with all these dumb kids and their dragons they don't know how to handle. But nobody's going to mess with you if you're riding this."

I couldn't even tell them I was afraid of it, or why. It was too humiliating. I could just imagine mom's reaction. "You?" she'd say. "But . . those girls in high school. You dated Susan for almost a year, didn't you? And Meredith. I just assumed ... never?" Then she'd laugh and say, "I won't even tell you about my first semester at college."

That night I couldn't sleep. I tossed and fidgeted and was angry. I thought. Has the world gone mad? People just flit about their neighborhoods on blood-lusting beasts, and everyone acts like this is okay. Isn't anyone bothered by this? Doesn't anyone care?

Outside I heard a soft jingle of metal. I looked up.

The dragon's eye, filling my window. I scrambled to my feet. The dragon had stretched its chain and slithered across the yard. Its pupil followed me as I backed toward the door. Its eye was red as blood. Blood of virgins.

I ducked into the hall, then hurried down the stairs and through the dining room. The dragon moved to that window. The dragon was terrible and magnificent. It was mine, and would impress a girl like Deirdre. I didn't want a girl like Deirdre. The dragon's serpentine shadow drifted over me. The padlock that swung from its collar caught the moonlight. Then I knew what I had to do, if I ever wanted to walk without dread beside the sea again, or stare without doubt into Miranda's eyes. I stepped out the back door.

The dragon crept forward on webbed and bony fingers. It halted ten feet away, its chain pulled taut. I took out my key. I approached the dragon, and it watched as I reached up and undid its padlock.

Its collar slid aside, then fell and hit the ground with a thud. The dragon fixed me with its hateful gaze. I stood my ground. The dragon snorted, exhaling fetid breath into my face. I thought to it, Go on, you bastard. Here I am. What are you waiting for? Maybe the dragon would lash out. But I refused to be haunted anymore. I waited.

Finally, the dragon looked away, losing interest. Maybe it disliked prey that it couldn't terrify and pursue. I relaxed a bit. I heaved the collar back around its neck, then replaced and closed the padlock, feeling bold as any dragonslayer.

At breakfast, I told my parents that I didn't want the dragon. Mom said, "Well are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," I said. "Dragons drink blood and they're dangerous." Then I added, daring her to respond, "Plus I'm a virgin, and they don't like virgins."

I'd never been that determined or blunt before. For once she didn't comment. She just said, "Oh."

SPRING SEMESTER BEGAN. I'D ONLY been back at school a few hours when someone knocked at my door. I answered it, expecting Matt, but it was Miranda. We both stared awkwardly for a moment, then she murmured, "You want to go for a walk?"

We walked along the bike path. Miranda told me about her vacation, then asked about mine. I said, "My parents bought me a dragon."

"No." She was incredulous.

"I made them return it."

"I should hope so." She paused, then said softly, "I heard about the accident." I nodded, and she asked, "Is your back OK?"

I shrugged.

She said, "Can I see?"

Reluctantly, I lifted the hem of my shirt, revealing the landscape of stitches. Miranda gasped. I let the shirt fall.

"I'm so sorry." She shook her head. "And sorry that I . . You were right to be afraid."

"No." I stepped in front of her, facing her. "You were right. I've been thinking a lot about what you said, about fear and love." I looked into her eyes. "I do love you, Miranda. I'm sorry I ever made you doubt that."

"Chris." She sighed sadly. "I don't know. We haven't ... It's too soon to be talking like that. We'll see, all right?"

"All right," I said, and we kept walking. But I was glad I'd said it. Because it wasn't too soon at all. It was past time.

So now I walk with Miranda at my side again and think on all that's happened since I rode the dragon that first week of college. The dragons are still circling overhead, ominously. Dragons have sharp teeth and lap up the blood of virgins. But now it's spring semester, and I'm older than I was. And wiser too.

And unafraid. ❧

Explore The Fantasy

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The Celtic Warrior Game has begun. Hearts will break, battles will be won and lost, but only one man can claim the title, Laird of the Game.

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www.shirleymartin.net

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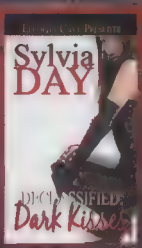
www.jorystrong.com

For Brann O'Gardha, Syndelle Coronado is a prize beyond measure, a vampire myth made reality. The moment Brann feels her hidden power as his companion Rafael mates with her, he resolves to possess her.

Jory Strong is one of the best authors when it comes to volcanic erotic romance. Filling the pages with scenes that are carnally uninhibited, she has outdone herself with the second installment in her Angelini series.
-A Romance Review



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www.SylviaDay.com

SO HOT my eyes were scorched reading each page. Keep something cool near by, you'll need it when you read this one!!
-TCR romance

MINE!
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The House Of Pendragon Book I: The Firebrand
www.telltalepress.com/debrakemp.html

Although sired by King Arthur, fate damns Lin to wear the slave collar of her half-brother, Modred. Robbed of identity, she clings to dignity until freedom restores her birthright.

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THE DRAGON IS DYING.

The city feels it in bones of stone and iron, in scabby concrete skin. The *otherkind* feel it, a weight in their blood. Even Simon feels it, mortal as he is. The city waits.

The dragon will die of age or violence, and another will take its place. Someone will eat the dragon's heart, and take its power. A lot of people are interested in the dragon's demise.

Some are less patient than others.

Simon crouches in a narrow alley that smells of blood and piss and damp brick. Dark clouds scrape their bellies over the rooftops overhead, heavy with unshed rain and ash from fires that raged the night before. He tastes char with every breath.

A sacrifice. Everyone knows you have to bleed for the dragon, or burn.

Simon's already burned, now he sheds blood.

The man at his feet gurgles one last time and falls silent. He's spoken all he needed to. Simon wipes his knife clean on the dead man's shirt. Chance's knife, silver on one side, cold iron on the other—it works on humans too.

He's going for the dragon tonight, the man said. And, *Mary Snakebones.*

Snake Charmer

BY AMANDA DOWNUM
ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS COCOZZA

VENGEANCE, THEY SAY, IS A DISH BEST SERVED COLD. BUT IT CAN BE HARD TO REMEMBER THAT WHEN YOUR VEINS ARE RUNNING HOT WITH ANGER AND DESPAIR.

Simon uncoils from his crouch, knife vanishing into his coat. He's not done with blood yet. Maybe not ever.

And he still needs to find a costume.

In the Garden of Eden every day is Halloween. Freaks, geeks, and tattooed women.

Tonight isn't much different, except for the costumed crowd and the orange and black streamers hanging from the ceiling, flickering like flames in the draft of the overburdened AC. Dancers writhe in pits and cages, the bass throb of the music drowning a dozen conversations, a dozen propositions and transactions. The air is nearly solid with smoke.

A woman crawls across the main stage, wearing vinyl boots and fingerless lace gloves, a witch's hat balanced on her hair. Not much else. Simon watches her flirt with the crowd and smiles. Chance always loved costumes, fancy dress. She'd have liked his outfit tonight.

His smile turns bitter and falls away. Chance is gone, and the woman he wants tonight won't be onstage.

He slides through the crowd, a colder, cleaner thread twining through the murk of sweat and spilled liquor. Just another costumed schmuck, but elbows and shoulders move aside for him. He rides the current, lets it spit him out in a shadowed back corner where Mary Snakebones holds court.

She's enthroned in a wide, shallow booth, surrounded by pretty hangers-on. Mostly goths and would-be witches. He catches the scent of fae, but it's faint, half breed at best. Sometimes she runs with a dangerous crowd, but not tonight. Mary's danger enough on her own.

He walks up slow, hands loose at his sides. Sweat trickles down his neck; the holster chafes the small of his back. He should have worn a shirt under the tailcoat. Mary's courtiers barely notice him. They'd all be dead, if that was his business tonight.

Mary notices. She watches him approach, eyes dark as sin under a weight of kohl. Waxy black lips curl. "Hello, Baron."

He tips his top hat, looks down over the tops of his dark round glasses. "Good evening, Marie."

She doesn't wear a costume. She doesn't have to. She's Mary Snakebones, Mojo Mary. The dragon's child. People would dress as her if they could pull it off.

She cocks one black brow. "Are you here for me, Baron?"

What would happen if he said yes? She looks so soft, so young, all trussed up in velvet and vinyl. Her smile isn't soft, nor her eyes young. He's almost tempted to find out.

"We need to talk."

Her eyes narrow, gaze burning through greasepaint and flesh. She's never seen this face before, but she nods. Maybe she can read his mind, or his soul, or invisible omens spinning around him. She waves a hand and the baby-bats scatter from the booth. "Sit with me."

"I was hoping for a more private conversation."

"Maybe later." She nods toward the stage. "My sister is dancing tonight."

He slides into the booth—easier than arguing. Leather creaks as he settles on her right. He keeps his eyes on the crowd, but the most dangerous thing in the room sits beside him.

"The ghost of Simon Magus." She studies him with a smile. "You're a boogeyman now, the thing waiting in the dark. They say you died too, that night."

He swallows. "I did."

"I like this face."

Whether she means the painted face or the one the surgeons gave him, he doesn't know. Doesn't want to know. "Sal is coming for you tonight."

Her smile widens. "Let him." Under the table she takes his left hand, her flesh warm through the leather of his glove. One sharp nail traces the underside of his ring finger, snags on the metal of his wedding band. "Poor Simon. Still wearing your grief like a brand." Sweat pricks his scalp, tickles greasy through the white paint on his face. His scars tingle. She moves closer, velvet coat rustling against his shoulder, breath tickling his ear. "You've killed someone tonight."

Their lips nearly brush as he turns to face her, bittersweet perfume filling his nose—almond and clove and autumn leaves. "Only one." His fingers tighten around hers. "Sal is after the dragon."

Black eyes narrow. "And death comes to tell me this."

"This?" He touches the brim of his hat. "It's just a costume."

"No, it isn't." Her left hand rises to touch his cheek, thumb trailing whisper soft over his cheekbone. "This face is very real tonight, Simon Magus."

"Don't call me that. I was never the one—"

Her hand trails down his chest, to the slick-ridged scar tissue over his heart. "I know a true name when I hear it, Simon."

He shudders, and wonders what else she knows. If she can read his heart, he's a dead man. She's too close, dizzying him—he could never draw in time.

The music stops, leaving only the ocean-murmur of the crowd and the surf of blood in Simon's ears. Mary shifts her attention to the stage and he fights a sigh of relief.

"And now—" The DJ's voice echoes over the speakers. "—Eve, and the snake."

A new song starts, slow and deep, and a woman glides onto the stage. Henna-red hair in wild gorgon braids, skin like cream and cinnamon. Her hair matches the python draped over her shoulders.

Someone in the crowd gasps. Simon sucks a breath through his teeth. The snake is longer than she is, muscle-fat tail wrapped around her waist. Garnet and cinnabar scales shine under the lights, shimmering with dusty yellow and black whorls.

Her name isn't Eve, of course, but Helene Dumanche. The dragon's priestess.

Beautiful as her sister, though they don't look like the twins they claim to be. Mary leans forward, her hand still tight around Simon's, eyes trained on the dance.

It's a real dance—Helene doesn't touch the pole, or leave her feet. Muscles play in her arms as she lifts the snake and twirls. Henna swirls across her back and breasts and belly, patterns rippling as she sways to the beat.

I've got something you can never eat.

She doesn't play to the crowd, either. No flirting or winking—she only makes eye contact with the snake. Money flutters onto the stage, but she doesn't touch it.

I've got something you can never eat.

Mary's chest rises and falls, café crème flesh constrained by her tight-laced bodice. It's not the woman undulating on stage that affects her so, no matter what the rumors say, but the power Helene raises with her dance. It whispers over Simon's skin like electric wind. He learned to feel those things around Chance.

"We should go," he says. "It isn't safe here."

"This is my place. They wouldn't dare."

A rueful smile tugs at his mouth. She's young after all, young and cocky. "They came to my place, Chance's place. They dared, and now she's dead."

Her thumb strokes his palm, tingling through the leather to the roots of his teeth. "And you're here to protect me? My white knight."

"I want Sal."

"What else do you want?"

His stomach clenches. She'll know if he lies. "I want to rest," he says after a moment. Some of the truest words he's ever spoken. "And I want to see the dragon." Chance always wanted to see one. He can almost hear her voice, feel her drowsing in his arms—but he can't bear to remember it now, not here, not with this witch.

"Are you willing to pay the price?"

She strikes as the last breath of assent leaves his lips, her fingers tangling in his hair. He stiffens, hand twitching toward his gun, but she's pulling his head toward hers, her lips pressing his till he feels her teeth, till he lets her tongue against his and the rum-sugar taste of her fills his mouth and he can't breathe.

She's strong—he can't break her grip, not without hurting her. Her hand presses against his scars again, against his heart. He hasn't kissed a woman since Chance, he's never kissed a woman like Mary. Her teeth sink into his lower lip and he tastes blood.

He pushes her away and she lets him. The rush of air between them raises goosebumps. His chest and lip sting.

"Damn it, Mary."

She wipes a drop of blood off her mouth, licks her finger clean. "You have to bleed."

His ears are ringing, and the shouts across the room register a heartbeat too late.

The crowd parts, dodging away from men with guns in their hands. Simon draws, but they've already got the drop on him. Muzzles raise, take aim, and the look on Mary's face nearly makes him laugh as he grabs her and pulls her over the side of the booth with him.

And the world shatters into screams and thunder.

Bullets thump into leather and wood, whistle over their heads. The air reeks of fear and cordite.

"They are dead men," Mary says. The words are lost in the cacophony, but Simon reads them on her lips and smiles.

"That's the plan, yeah." He leans around the edge of the booth and squeezes the trigger. Bad angle, and a man falls with a hole in his thigh, but still alive. Someone else shoots back. The crowd swarms, glass shatters as a waitress drops a tray and lunges for the emergency exit. There's a commotion on the stage.

Then a woman screams Mary's name.

"Helene!" And she's moving, coat billowing as she runs for the stage. Simon curses and lunges after her, gun kicking in time with his heartbeat as he lays down cover. Patrons shriek and dodge, clogging the front door. Pain like a wasp sting in his left arm, and someone behind him screams and chokes.

He tackles Mary, knocks her into the sheltering T intersection of the stage. Heat soaks his sleeve.

"Mary!" The cry is fainter now, closer to the door.

"They've got her." She struggles against Simon's grip, and he wonders if he'll have to hit her.

He hears the flames first, a crackling rush that floods adrenaline through him. Then the wave rolls over the ceiling, beautiful and liquid. Streamers rain down in sparks and ashes.

Sal's work. Simon's pulse stutters triple-time, a burning scrap of paper brushes his cheek and panic threatens to swallow him. He fights it down, prays for the ice to take it away. A woman twitches

on the floor, blood bubbling from her mouth and chest. Lung shot—Simon contemplates a mercy kill, but doesn't want to waste a bullet.

"Back door," he shouts at Mary.

"They've got my sister!"

"And we can't get her back if we're dead." Already smoke sticks in his throat, makes his eyes water. Eyeliner bleeds black tears down Mary's cheeks. After a second she nods.

He pushes Mary ahead of him and slides along the side of the stage. The shooting's stopped. The woman on the floor lifts a pleading hand toward them. Simon pauses for an instant, then gives her what he can. Blood halos beneath her head.

Something hisses angrily in his ear, a second's warning. His left arm screams as he raises it, screams again as his hand closes around Helene's striking snake. The force jars through him, and he barely holds on as its jaws gape in front of his face. Needle teeth glint, dark tongue flickering.

Its body writhes against his arm, looking for a grip to crush. A tube of heavy muscle, covered in oiled leather; his skin crawls at the touch. His hand tightens, glove blood slippery, thumb squeezing under its jaw.

The streets are nearly empty tonight—smart residents know when to stay inside and lock their doors. Halloween is dangerous enough, without a dragon's death for lagniappe.

And the dragon dies tonight, one way or another. Simon feels it in his scars.

The car reeks of blood and rum, both soaking the bandages under Simon's sleeve. It hurts, but he can use the arm. A crust of blood dulls his ring. He slides a fresh clip home, chambers a round.

Mary nearly hums with power, the electric smell of it tingling in his sinuses. They surprised her in the Garden—she won't let it happen again. Streetlights spark and die as they pass, maybe Mary's work, but he doesn't ask. They head for the docks, and darkness follows in their wake.

"Is Sal the last?" Mary asks.

They walk now, the car—and the snake—abandoned in a dark alley. Simon hears water nearby, and the clang of train canisters loading and unloading. Thunder snarls in the distance, but still no rain.

"No," he finally answers. She'll know a lie. Long practice keeps his voice and pulse calm, but his stomach twists. Tonight will end ugly.

A blur of fire and ash, of smoke and embers. Red and gold and black and gray, cracking, shifting, seething. Winged and scaled and feathered and furred and Simon can't make sense of it. He staggers, goes to one knee.

And Mary appears, black nailed hands scooping up the python, cooing as she drapes its massive coils over her shoulders. It hisses at Simon as he lets go, then settles onto Mary, pacified by a familiar person.

"Follow me." Her heels beat a staccato rhythm as she darts for the door behind the stage.

Smoke billows after them into the raw cement hallway, gray tendrils eddying in their wake. "They'll use Helene to find the dragon," Simon says as they run.

"She won't tell them."

"Then Sal will kill her, and spread her guts out to learn the way."

Mary flinches, and for a second he thinks she'll turn and run back into the inferno. He grabs her arm. "Can you talk to her?"

"Yes," she says after a minute.

"Then tell her to take them to the dragon, and not to fight. We'll meet them there."

She nods, sucks in a deep breath, the python rises with the swell of her chest. Her eyes roll back in her head for a moment and she sways. Simon steadies her, blood dripping off his hand. She's back in heartbeats and the fear eases around her eyes.

She touches his hand, frowns at the blood. He cranes his neck, sees entrance and exit. The bullet went through the meat of his upper arm, not too serious, though it burns like hell. Blood soaks his sleeve shiny, drips in fat drops off his knuckles.

"That should have been mine," she says. She tastes his blood again, but she's not flirting now.

"Let's go, Mary." Smoke pours from the front now, the fire's roar louder.

He's afraid the gunmen will have the back covered, but the parking lot and alley are empty. Sal got what he came for. Simon's blood cools in the evening chill, and goosebumps crawl over his chest. The air still tastes like char. Sirens scream in the distance, getting closer.

Simon holsters his gun, wipes sweat out of his eyes. Somehow he's managed not to lose the hat.

Mary grins, sallow and tear-streaked in the sodium glow. "I told you it was a true face. I'll dress that for you—" She nods toward his arm. "Then we'll see the dragon."

Mary drives, sleek black car purring through the crumbling streets of Old Town. Buildings rise like rotted teeth around them, tearing at the clouds. The city is dying, slow and broken.

one way or another. He touches his tongue to his swollen lip. "Sal's the last of the ones who killed Chance, but he didn't give the orders. His boss dies too."

"That's a lot of death for one man."

Too much for any man. "I'll manage."

"Sal is trying to break away," she says after a moment. "That's why he's after the dragon. He wants free of his masters."

Simon frowns. "He should have tried sooner."

Sal never set foot in their house that night, never fired a shot. Chance took two bullets, Simon three, but it was the fire that killed her. The fire that brought the ceiling down, costing Simon half his face and very nearly his left arm. Chance died screaming his name.

"What will you do when you're done?"

He sighs. "Rest."

"You don't have to waste yourself on revenge."

"If they die, it's not wasted. I don't have anything left, anyway."

Mary touches his arm, soft enough to make him shiver. "I can give—" She stops, hand tightening. "They're coming. And we're here."

Simon looks up at the building—five stories, cement and brick. It looks odd, and in a moment he realizes why. It was a parking garage once, now walled in. Heavy wood and iron doors stand where the ticket booth should have been.

Simon's hand tightens on his gun, and he double-checks the weight of the knife in his pocket.

Lights cut through the night, and three cars pull up to the curb. Simon presses against the alley wall, pushing Mary back.

She hums under her breath as she balances on one foot, tugging off her tall-heeled boot. Simon frowns, glances at the glitter of broken glass on the ground. She's moved easily enough in heels so far. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Her smile makes his shoulder blades prickle; she slips her other foot free. "I walk on pins and needles, I walk on gilded splinters. I want to see what they can do." Her voice is lower, throatier. The air smells of rum and cinnamon and Simon's skin tightens. She shrugs free of her coat, vinyl corset shining red as heart's blood.

Car doors open, and men emerge. Simon recognizes Sal's scimitar-nosed profile in a brief flicker of light.

Dominic Salieri. Nicky the Salamander, though never to his face. The whisper stream says he's part ifrit. To Simon, he's just another dead man.

But not yet, because Sal reaches into the car and pulls out Helene She's wrapped in a man's jacket, doesn t look hurt. Sal handles her gently enough, but Simon can see her tremble. He could shoot past her, but not fast enough to take down the dozen thugs before one of them could kill her

She doesn't fight She's waiting for Mary

Simon's not sure Mary's here anymore

Two men open the doors, another two rolling in to secure the room. Nothing happens, and Sal escorts Helene into the darkness of the dragon's lair.

Mary turns to Simon, pinning him to the wall "A kiss for luck, Baron."

His swollen lip throbs, and he braces for the pain But she doesn't bite this time

Her tongue burns against his, heat rushing through him, drawing the pain away, melting the ice. It hurts, like something tearing inside, and he wants to push her away, but somehow his arms are around her, gun hand pressing the small of her back, crushing her to him He hasn't ached for anyone like this since

She pulls away, cheeks flushed, eyes shining. The hair on the back of his neck stands up as he realizes he just kissed a goddess. Or something close to one.

"Mary—"

"Not quite."

"Erzulie."

Her smile is fierce and bloodthirsty, flashing bright as the knives in her hands "Come on, Baron. The dragon wants blood."

And she steps out of the alley.

Six of Sal's guards wait by the door, and they all turn, guns raising Simon's stomach clenches She's blocking his shot, drawing their fire. He can already imagine the sight of her blood on the pavement.

But Mary starts to dance.

And Simon's jaw drops for a second, as he remembers who she is

She writhes serpent lithe, daggers like steel fangs. Her sister's dance was just a shadow of this. At first the guards can only stare as she swirls toward them, barefoot on the pitted, glass-strewn street

Someone breaks the spell and fires

But Mary isn't there, spinning out of the bullet's path like she could pluck it out of the air if it suited her. Then she's on the man, and his throat opens in a red-black spray

Simon's gun roars and men fall, one, two, three. Mary's heel catches one in the gut as her knife comes down on the other's gun arm Simon aims and she slides out of the way, letting him finish the one doubled over retching

She knows just where to cut as she opens the last man's chest Simon's guts turn to ice water as she straightens, red to the elbows, blood dripping down her cheek Her eyes flash like coals in the streetlight

The smell inside the temple fills Simon's nose, makes his flesh crawl Snakes, musky and autumnal, smoke and ash. His stomach cramps with atavistic terror, balls trying to crawl into his torso. He blows a long breath out his nose, wrestling the need to flee. He has to see this through

Mary, or Erzulie, takes his arm, turns him toward her She traces a wavy line on his forehead with one bloody finger and the fear recedes. He almost misses it.

Dim lamplight spills across the wide room, throws long shadows across the cement floor Open spaces, wide ramps. Enough room for a bus to maneuver Or a dragon

"Which way?" he asks.

Mary's nostrils flare as she scans the room. "Down."

The air warms as they descend, and the smell worsens. Not just the reptile reek, but the smell of age, or illness. Of a dying beast.

He sees a shadow flicker at the edge of his vision, right before someone shoots Bullets crack against the wall behind them Simon dodges behind a pillar, but Mary's moving in a blood-streaked blur, bare feet silent on the floor. An instant later he hears a gurgle and a heavy thump

"Follow me, boy," she calls "Try to keep up."

Simon's face feels strange; it takes a second to realize he's grinning. Then Mary gasps in pain

He rounds the corner to find two men bleeding all over the floor and Mary leaning against the wall, a hand pressed against her stomach

"He had a knife." Her voice is mortal again, and strained.

Vinyl gapes and curls like skin, a wide gash above her navel. Her corset stays took the worst of it, at least, and nothing s punctured. Blood wells dark as pomegranate juice in the shadows.

"I'm fine," she says, waving him off

It would be easier without her, but he nods She keeps up, though sweat slicks her face and her lips punch pale.

Shots echo below them, followed by a sound that curdles Simon's blood Not a hiss, not a roar, not a volcano's belch, but all of them at once. The screams don't last long They round the last corner and enter the dragon's chamber

A blur of fire and ash, of smoke and embers Red and gold and black and gray, cracking, shifting, seething Winged and scaled and feathered and furred and Simon can't make sense of it He staggers, goes to one knee

The dragon

Chance's voice in his head, soft and resonating *Beautiful. So beautiful* For an instant he can feel her beside him, smell the soft scent of her skin Tears stream down his face, scalding

He climbs to his feet Sweat slicks his palm, slippery against the rough hatched gun grip.

Sal stands in front of them, silhouetted against the dragon s glow. He's still got Helene, and Simon won't risk the shot

"Sal!" His voice cracks, rough with smoke. "Let her go."

Sal turns, dragging Helene around. He's got a gun in his free hand; the muzzle gleams as he levels it at Simon.

And pauses His face is in shadow, but Simon feels the weight of his stare

"What's the matter, Sal? Don't you recognize me?" He strips off the torn and bloody coat, one sleeve at a time, tosses hat and glasses aside. Pink and white scars shine in the firelight. "Recognize your work?"

"Simon Mann?" Sal laughs "So it has been you, the ghost, the thing that's got everyone jumping at shadows. You've done me a lot of favors in the past few months."

"I'll do one more Let the girl go"

"What is this—revenge? You should know better It was just a job, Simon."

"It was my wife."

"After tonight, I'll never work for Manny again. Hell, I'll turn him to ash That was what Chance wanted, wasn't it?"

Simon fights the urge to spit. "Don't worry, that will still happen."

Behind him, Mary's breath hisses. Simon's chest tightens, she's finally read his heart

He's starting to wonder how long they'll stand here like this, guns pointed, when Helene decides it for them. Her foot slams into Sal's knee and she throws herself down

Simon dodges, pulling the trigger Both guns flash. Sal falls, but his bullet catches Simon's left shoulder like a white-hot hammer. His vision washes red as he stumbles against a pillar

His chest heaves, pulse echoing in his ears, louder than the dragon's rasping breath. His left arm hangs nearly useless at his side—pity it's not numb So tired, but he can't rest, not yet.

He pushes himself up. Confirm the kill, but Mary's standing in front of him, black eyes narrow.

"You came for the dragon."

"I did I have to"

"Do you even know what he is? Do you understand, or is this just another death?"

"That's what I do, Mary. The dragon is power--I can't take out Manny like this, as a man. I'll kill until there's no one left. If you want to cut my heart out then, I won't stop you."

"That's not how it works. My sister is the priestess, the chosen child. This city has enough killers, Simon. It needs new life."

His eyes sag shut for a heartbeat. "I don't have anything to do with life anymore."

She moves closer and he flinches, but she only lays a hand over his heart. "It's not too late. We can give you something more."

"I just want to rest. But I have to keep going. I promised Chance."

Strength is dripping out of him in crimson streams. Already his vision is gray around the corners.

He straightens, steps past Mary. "I promised."

She grabs his arm, nails gouging. "Simon, I won't—"

He punches her in the gut, gun still in his hand. She makes a noise like a run-over cat and falls, face draining gray.

"Sorry," he whispers as he turns away.

Helene lifts her head from where she kneels naked beside the dragon. Tears shine on her cheeks. "It's time. He's dying."

Simon staggers closer, heat washing over him in waves. He can see the beast now, massive head on the ground beside Helene, body long as a train car sprawled limp across the ground. Its chest heaves, dark smoke curling from its nostrils. One lantern eye shines, half shut. The other is sunken and swollen shut, leaking black blood and clear fluids. Its forked purple tongue flickers amid broken bone-needle teeth.

Its hide is rough, dark as coal, but as it moves sparks of red and gold writhe through the black. Like falling embers. Even dying, it's beautiful. Chance always wanted to see a dragon.

He raises the dragon's beating heart. His hands are twisted things of char and bone. He'll be dead in seconds if he doesn't eat.

He's been dead for a year.

The city needs new life. He can't give it that.

All he wants is rest.

He steps forward, boot soles dripping ribbons of melting rubber. He falls to his knees in front of Helene and offers her the burning heart.

Chance. I'm sorry.

And as she takes it from him Simon collapses, wreck of a body giving out at last, and hot concrete rushes up to meet him, drives the last breath from his lungs.

Simon dies.

Simon burns.

Not the torturous fires of a hell he's never believed in. Not even the fire of his own hell, all too real. This is clean.

No smoke, no soot. Just white heat, dissolving him. He wishes he could cry for the sheer relief of it.

The dragon is there, inside him, surrounding him. It eats his heart.

He failed, broke his promise, but this isn't so bad. This is a better death than he ever imagined for himself.

And then it's over.

Simon gasps, chest hitching painfully. His face is wet, the taste of blood and tears thick on his tongue. He opens his eyes—both of them—and stares at the soot-scarred ceiling of a parking garage. His gun gouges the small of his back.

He lifts his hands. Whole, clean. He sits up, and nothing hurts, but the skin on his chest pulls oddly as he moves.

Blood like boiling oil. Clinging. Burning. The pain is worse than anything he's ever imagined, until it simply stops, too much for his body to hold, and it rolls over him.

Simon brushes its snout with his left hand, hisses as his fingers blister. His blood bubbles as it drips on the dragon's nose. The dragon sighs, a rush of steam, and Simon's skin tingles.

Helene looks at him, hazel eyes shining by dragonlight. "I have to eat his heart." Tears drip off her lashes, evaporating before they reach her chin.

Mary staggers closer, limping now, hunched over her bleeding stomach. "You don't have to do it, Simon. You think we won't take care of this? You think you and yours are the only ones Manny's ever hurt? There will be vengeance, all you could ever want, and you don't have to die for it."

"Yes, I do."

He holsters the gun, draws his knife. Silver and steel gleam like a flame in his hand as he stands over the dragon. Mary curses softly. Helene just watches him with eerie golden eyes.

The dragon doesn't fight, just rolls, baring the hollow of his breast. The hide is softer here, like oiled leather.

The knife slides home and Helene lets out a strangled scream. Then Simon can't hear anything but the roar of his own heart.

Blood like boiling oil. Clinging. Burning. The pain is worse than anything he's ever imagined, until it simply stops, too much for his body to hold and it rolls over him. His vision tunnels, and all he can see is the ruin of flesh in front of him, the blackened skin of his arms.

The blade melts as he cuts, barely lasts long enough to sever the great throbbing veins. The gush of blood sears half his face, blinds his right eye. The fluid dripping down his cheek is too thick to be tears.

And then the heart is free, pulsing in his hands. Fire ripples blue-green, washing up his arms. Consuming him. His own heart is failing.

He turns, sees Helene and Marie Dimanche watching him, wide-eyed. Helene has her arm over Mary's shoulder, and they really do look like sisters.

His scars are gone.

He touches his chest, his arms, his face. Burn scars, blade scars, bullet wounds, the scars the surgeons' scalpels left. Everything gone.

His breath leaves him on a sob.

"Welcome back, Simon Magus."

Mary sits a few yards away, Helene draped motionless over her lap. No cleansing fire for her--she's still ash streaked and bruised. The dragon is gone, leaving only pools of blood flickering with green-gold flames.

Sal is gone too, and bloody footprints lead up the ramp.

Simon pushes himself to his knees and stares at Helene's still form. "Is she—"

"She's resting."

"She's not ..."

"A dragon?" She smiles her wicked smile. "She is, just a baby one. These things take time." She strokes her sister's Medusa braids with a gentle hand.

"Why am I still alive?"

"The dragon must like you. And because my sister will need help, as she grows. She has a lot of work to do."

Simon runs a weary hand over his face. "I just wanted to rest."

"We rarely get what we want." Her smug smile belies the words. Mary is used to getting what she wants. "Besides, a lot of people will need killing before this is over." She shifts her weight and winces. "Help me get her home."

Simon sighs and obeys, crouching to take Helene into his arms. Her skin is feverishly hot.

Mary catches his hand before he can stand, nails piercing skin. "If you ever hit me like that again, I'll have your balls for a *gris gris* bag."

He just nods, face carefully flat, and lifts Helene.

Outside it's raining, the sky opened up to wash the city clean. Mary limps beside him as he carries the newborn dragon into the world. ❧

A THUNDEROUS SPLASH OF COLOR AND LIGHT, POWERFUL AND CLANDESTINE FIGURES CONTRASTED WITH COLD AND MELTING HUES—THESE ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS IN A HILDEBRANDT BROTHERS' PAINTING.

A TELOWSHIP IN ART

BY: JAMES WILLIAMS

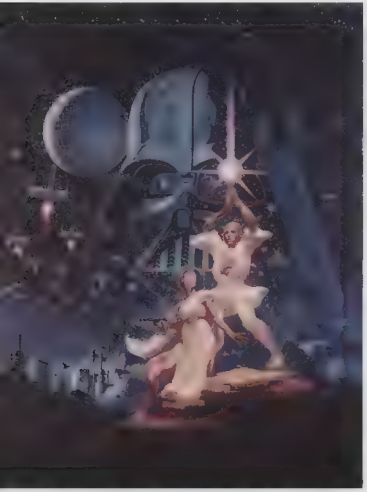
SHORTLY BEFORE WE WENT TO PRESS WITH THIS ISSUE WE LEARNED THAT TIM HILDEBRANDT HAD PASSED AWAY ON JUNE 11, 2006. WE WOULD LIKE TO OFFER OUR SINCERE SYMPATHY TO TIM'S FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

GREG AND TIM HILDEBRANDT HAVE BEEN PAINTING

all their lives. Greg credits his mother's storytelling for imparting a strong love for fantasy and stories in the twins while they were growing up. "Our mother read us fairy tales, just sitting on the couch with us she would spew stories off the top of her head. Totally invent them, much like Tolkien did with *The Hobbit*. .. Our mother had a very active imagination and if it wasn't for her, we probably wouldn't have gone in the direction we did."

There was always a strong support for the importance of imagination, creativity, and dreams in the Hildebrandt household. Greg and Tim grew up in an environment that both advocated and inspired the imagination and creative process, thanks to both their parents. Greg truly believes that he and Tim were meant to be doing exactly what they are. "I believe everything is interconnected and that nothing happens by accident."

Although the Hildebrandt brothers have produced hundreds if not thousands of paintings and illustrations over the years, they are best known for their collaborative work on *The Lord of the Rings* calendars.



Greg and Tim got the go-ahead for their first calendar in 1976. Although excited by the news, they were soon knee-deep in work. Greg explains, "They [Ballantine Books] said, 'OK, well you've got six months.' You know, that's fourteen paintings in six months! And we hadn't even started anything yet. We went home and it was like a bat out of hell." And that's how it was for the three consecutive years of *The Lord of the Rings* calendars.

The approach to each calendar seemed to evolve over time, as well. Greg says, "The first calendar started with smaller paintings, except the centerfold. For the second one, I said, 'Tim, you've been pushing to do this thing, now we're really going to do it!' So I said let's paint the pictures bigger, which we did." But eventually Greg realized that they weren't going to get the paintings done on time at the rate they were going. Although they had a ten-month head start for the second calendar, they also had other commissions, works, and family responsibilities to contend with. So, by the third calendar, the size of the paintings came down again.

ABOVE: *The Fellowship of the Ring*. LEFT: Painting for *Star Wars* po
Orchestra's Christmas CD and concert.

Reminiscing, Greg happily talks of the time he and Tim were first exposed to the Tolkien universe. "Tim read *The Hobbit* first. We were making films on World Hunger at the time (1967-1968), when Tim did a painting on his own and brought it into the office. It was of a little gnome hopping along over a bridge ... and a girl in the office said, 'That looks like the Hobbit.' He said, 'What's that?' And she brought the book in and Tim read it. Then Tim read *The Lord of the Rings*. I hadn't read it yet and he kept bugging me to read it."

It was years later when Greg finally picked up the Tolkien books and read them himself. He credits Tim's persistence and drive for ultimately getting them both involved in doing many *Lord of the Rings* illustrations and paintings. "Tim was the main force in getting this off the ground, because he was relentless in his nagging of me. I was more into social realism at the time." Tim finally convinced Greg to explore the more escapist world that was Middle-Earth.

Once Greg read the books, he immediately fell in love with them. "I loved the books, of course, and went nuts about them, because I'd always been into fantasy—Tim and I both. They just took me over completely. Then we started to paint the pictures, and as we painted the pictures, it became more real. We were lost in that world for three years or so.

"There was so much death and destruction and chaos and confrontation in this country, not only in Vietnam, that I got into those books on a level of 'God, these are a clear-cut good guys and bad

guys' So I could really escape into them with that sense of good and evil "

Greg goes on to add that as artists it is extremely important for him and Tim to add their own flavor or stamp to their interpretations of the characters and story Their paintings are not exact, down to-the-last-detail renderings of what J.R.R. Tolkien described. "As an illustrator, you have to make it your own or you're just doing a job, like a cog in a machine. Tim would read each passage accurately, while I would skim it. I just wanted to get the feeling of the thing, then I wanted to jump into it and make it my own You have to do that to immerse yourself in it. There has to be a feeling that this is yours, but with the idea of capturing the spirit of the text."

The massive success of the calendars and re issues of the books showcasing the Hildebrandts' *Lord of the Rings* works, which have sold in the millions and in at least 12 different languages, clearly demonstrate that the fans have embraced the brothers' interpretations of J R R Tolkien's works

O.it of the hundreds of Tolkien paintings and illustrations Greg and Tim have done together, one might think it impossible for Greg to chose any favorites. But, when asked, Greg hardly hesitates when answering: "The centerfolds for the calendars, there's *The Unexpected Party*, there's *The Fellowship of the Ring*—the whole group—and then *The Grey Havens*. Those always had a big impact and response from people "

Two of Greg's personal favorites are *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Unexpected Party* These two illustrations are dynamically different in color and lighting, yet both are strong character pieces The latter is almost overwhelming in warmth, comfort, and whimsy, with Bilbo and Gandolf sitting by a fireplace surrounded by several dwarfs playing musical instruments

In contrast, the *Fellowship* is depicted in the outdoors, with a low horizon indicating early morning or oncoming evening There is a cool breeze blowing during an autumn day, but there is also warmth in the sunlight and heavy clothing the characters wear, plus strong casts of shadow

Both of these illustrations show the strengths of the Hildebrandt brothers· character representations and the use and balance of color and light. Greg says, "We have, I think, this big focus on character. A lot of other artists do a lot of long shots a lot of the time We'll do lots of close-ups and medium shots because our background is in animation and film, and I always looked at it like we were doing a movie—kind of You know, you gotta get your close-in views, you gotta get your interiors, your exteriors, you want your good guys and you want your bad guys, you want warm scenes, you want cool scenes, you want moonlight, you want firelight, you want sunlight.... That's how we approached illustrating then."

At the time of this interview, Greg and Tim were working on another painting from *The Lord of the Rings* saga. It's a key battle scene from *The Return of the King*, and is proving to be a great challenge and delight for Greg. "We are working on a private commission right now It s going to take a year to paint. It s the final fall of Mordor. Its going to be a big, huge thing God knows how many figures are in the scene! Its towers have collapsed and Aragorn is on his command mound. his men are all around, the dark clouds are breaking up, the sun's rays are starting to show through because Mount Doom is going down, and the dark towers are going down and the eagles are flying in!" Greg speaks with both fervor and pride about his latest work

And not to worry, Greg says there will definitely be prints and the like of the final product for fans to see and purchase copies, even though the original painting is a commission piece

With his and Tim's obvious long history with *The Lord of the Rings*, Greg cannot help but touch upon Peter Jackson's films With a chuckle and warmth in his tone, Greg is very happy to say that "those movies are so overwhelming They're like, Holy Mackerel!"

Capturing Tolkien's world in live action was something Greg and Tim tried to do themselves in 1978. They approached Ballantine Books, after having completed their third calendar for the company, and pitched them a live action version of the books. But, as most people know, Ralph Bakshi had the film rights at the time and was soon coming out with the animated version. Admittedly, Greg can look back now and see that it would've been impossible to do a live action movie of the books back then—at least not a movie that would have done Tolkien justice. "It couldn't have been done until now. Until CGI ... I mean, Gollum just blew me away, totally blew me away! He was overwhelming emotionally, technically, artistically. Everything about him! Just incredible." He also credits director/writer Peter Jackson as being the true marvel behind getting the movies made and doing such an incredible job at it. The sheer obsession and scope of filming three movies back-to-back, and rendering such a faithful, spirited, and respectful adaptation is almost beyond words for Greg. He can't help but to heap praise upon the films.

With the success of the Peter Jackson movies, the Hildebrandts have experienced a major resurgence of interest in their classic *Lord of the Rings* works. Greg credits their business manager, Jean Scrocco, with getting the book *Greg and Tim Hildebrandt: The Tolkien Years*, by Greg Hildebrandt, Jr., off the ground and into stores. "She spent seven to eight years going to publishers, gathering all the stuff, designing it, and ... the book has done very well."

Whether it's early fans revisiting classic Hildebrandt illustrations or new fans discovering them for the first time, Greg is extremely thrilled to see the renewed interest in both his and Tim's work and J.R.R. Tolkien's writings.

Although Greg and Tim frequently collaborate, each is a notable artist in his own right. Each has particular strengths that seem to complement the other's very well. "Tim has a much greater grasp on and passion for nature and architecture than I do, even though I dig it and do it and am into it, too. But for me, it's the figure. If I had to make a choice, that's what I'd focus on completely—characters, people, creatures." But together, their key strength, with no surprise to any fan, is their use of "light and color. That's something that we started to get a grasp on together. Light and how it affects color."

ABOVE: One of Greg's *American Beauties* PEL Gift: Keeper of ... Fi... Hildebrandts' best-selling novel, *Urshurrak*.

For those aspiring artists who feel heavily influenced by The Brothers Hildebrandt, Greg is very forthcoming in how he and Tim work together on a painting. From the initial concepts and designs to the finished product, Greg explains that after a scene is chosen, "we'll start to do a bunch of little sketches separately, with different points of view, or we'll talk it through ... then do sketches, either together or separately, pin it down, agree on it." They then determine the light source, where it's coming from, how it's affecting the characters, the scenery, the objects, and what color the light source is. "Then we get models, costumes—which we make, find, buy, rent—and take photographs according to the sketch. We pretty much pin down our whole setup: composition, pose, and attitude. And then we get the people in the studio, put the lights where the lighting is predetermined in our sketches, and take a lot of pictures. There isn't much improvisation when it comes to the photo."

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Myths & Legends

By Kathe Koja | *Illustration by Kris Chau*

So it's 10:30, and there's no more chai, and "Symon Says" is a rerun (the one where Symon and Mickey get stuck in the gynecologist's office), so I turn the sound down on the TV and move to the keyboard. Because I have got to write this paper, this play, right, for Drama. Introduction to Drama, I never asked to be introduced but I needed one more English credit and Mr. Banks was supposed to be an easy grader. So here I am, trying to pick a topic. The paper's due in the morning, naturally

Write a one-act play (three pages, at least two characters) about one of the Myths or Legends on the topic list (Examples: Mermaid Summer, Thor vs. Loki, Leprechauns and Faeries, When Cupid Met Psyche.) "When Cupid Met Psyche"? Please. Why do teachers even try to be funny? Why not "Psycho Psyche," and she stabs Cupid through the shower curtain in the Olympus Motel? Actually, I didn't make that one up, Davy did. Davy's always saying stuff like that. He's really funny and really smart, so smart that half the time I don't even get his jokes but I laugh anyway so he won't think I'm a dumb blonde. Unless he thinks it anyway, but won't say so because he's so nice. And he's amazing looking, too, did I mention that?

Ten forty-five. Is there really no more chai? No cold soda either? My brother probably drank it all, the slob.

Eleven o'clock. Come on, you can do this. *Myths and Legends*, fairy tales.

We have many names, we are everywhere, we have always been. Fire to your clay, we burn, rise as sparks while you stamp and slobber in the mud. We are the stuff of your desires, we grow wild. Wild. Every name you have for us is wrong.

MERMAID: Come with me into the sea.

FISHERMAN: But I can't swim. And I can't breathe underwater.

MERMAID: I'll breathe for you. Just come on.

FISHERMAN: But I don't even know your name.

MERMAID: That's OK. You can call me . . .

No, that's stupid, I don't even like mermaids. What else is there on the list? Davy's already doing the Norse one (he's calling it "I Love

Loki," isn't that cool?), and about twenty people are doing Cupid, so what's left? Leprechauns and fairies, gag.

How could anyone believe in that stuff. I mean even in the Dark Ages or whatever people still had to have *some* common sense, right? Although according to Mr. Banks their fairies weren't like what people think now, like the Tooth Fairy and fluffy pink wings and all that. But it's like believing in, in ghosts or the Twilight Zone or something, the monster under the bed (or in the basement, that's where mine used to be, between the washer and the dryer; when I was little I would never, I mean *never*, go down there in the dark. My mom would ask me to bring up some soda or something, and I'd be like, *No! no!* until I cried, and my dad or my little brother had to go instead.) How could anyone take that stuff seriously?

Well, maybe I can write a comedy.

Fern, nökke, husälfar, troll and droc and mazikeen. Blood-cousin to the fallen angels, the changeling spawn of exiled Adam forced, enticed, to lie with others than Eve; others than human. In those days there were giants in the land, does not the Scripture say so? Your Scripture. We have no written history, we need nothing but now, this breathing moment, our breathing in your ear, do you hear? Did you think it was the wind? an errant branch, a prowling animal? Yes. And no.

Your paths are intersections for our travels, our dark sun rides another sky, but sometimes we pass close enough to see, to watch, to touch. Our touch is light, still it leaves a mark. Always it leaves a mark on the mud.

LEPRECHAUN: Always after my Lucky Charms! [He struggles but they hold him tightly. He's small anyway and can't get away.] Let me go!

GIRL: Hey, don't have a stroke. We're going to let you go. In the myths and legends it says you guys will give us three wishes, well we're not greedy, we just want one apiece. Right, Davy?

GUY: Right. And I know what mine is right now. [Kisses GIRL.]

In the hallway I hear my mom, saying something to my brother. "—lock the back door, James?" and he just grunts back, *nuh-nhug*, like a Neanderthal, too disgusting for human speech. Then her knock, *tick-tick*, her nails against my door; she has great nails, just flawless, not all split and chipped like mine. A French manicure every other week, but will she pay for one for me? No. She's so unfair.

"Are you still up, Elise?"

No, I'm sleeping at the computer with my eyes open. "I'm doing homework."

"Oh. Well, don't stay up too late, all right? School starts early."

"OK."

Door clicks, her footsteps down the hall. The muted TV flickers and I shut it off. Now my room is lit only by computer light, like an aquarium, like the lights I used to have for my lizards. A glass box filled with green plants and flat gray rocks, when I'd pick up the lizards they'd squirm in my hand, then stop, turn to stone as if they knew there was nothing they could do but wait to be released again. I'd pet them—well, you can't really pet a lizard, but I'd stroke their pebbly skin, bring them close to look into their eyes, black eyes as flat and otherworldly as, as what? Like staring straight up into space, or down a well, you can't see to the bottom, as if they saw something, knew something I didn't, and were just waiting for me to see it, too. Or go away. Either way was fine with them.

[They put the leprechaun into a glass cage, like a big aquarium. He stomps around, pushing at the walls, but he can't get out.]

LEPRECHAUN: My power can't work in a box! You have to set me free!

GIRL: We'll let you go as soon as you give us our wishes.

GUY: We want.

Well, what *do* they want? How should I know? Only a page and a half so far, and that's with big margins. What would you wish for, I mean if it were really true, if there were such things as leprechauns or genies-in-the-bottle or whatever? Not a million more wishes, that never works, or even regular stuff like tons of money or a new car (I'd probably pick a Jaguar, a silver Jag two-seater with burgundy leather seats). I mean those things would be nice, but—If you *really* had a wish you could use, one you knew would be granted no matter what, what would you ask for? You'd have to want it a lot, and for always, not just now. And you'd have to be really careful because wishes can turn on you. Like that story we had in Lit last year, what's it called? Where the dead guy gets wished back to life, except he's not alive, he's like some horrible zombie even his own mother doesn't—"The Monkey's Paw," right. That must have been some monkey.

Maybe that's what I should write. "The Leprechaun's Curse," like where they wish for something but it gets all inverted and ugly, like the girl wishes they'd—no, I don't want to write that. I don't like to think about things like that.

But—but if it *was* a real leprechaun and he was captured in some aquarium, why would he, it, whatever, *want* to grant your wish even to get free? And even if he did, wouldn't he want a payback of some kind, revenge for getting caught in the first place?

You dream of wishes granted, great gifts bestowed for nothing, as if to grasp must be to gain.

What if the leprechaun knew what you wanted was bad for you, or just bad in itself, wrong, something that shouldn't happen but he gave it to you anyway? Gave it to you *because* it was wrong and then laughed when you let him go, jeered at you, like: *Enjoy your jag!* and then you wreck and you're paralyzed for life or something? Or *The one you want will love you forever!* as he peers at you through the glass with flat eyes like my lizards', like black water in a well, like the sky at night that goes on forever, *forever*, who knows how long that is? Do you really want to find out?

And then he does love you, the guy you want, even when he's like a hundred years old and all sick and desiccated and awful, even when he's *dead*, he stays with you always.

Always.

You people of the mud, you dream of wishes granted, great gifts bestowed for nothing, as if to grasp must be to gain. Perhaps for you it is, with the simple toys you fancy, baubles like bubbles that burst when the wind rises, the wind and the fire, our fire that burns in the empty places, there where you fear to fathom, fathom the fear that drowns the mind, that cracks the mud-heart like old desert clay, yes.

But still you are incorrigible, corruptible, you wish, you pray, and we hear you, not the clean prayers of the will but the hot, wet, twisting whispers of the meat, the red heart that thinks itself the center of the sun, what sun? what heart? what you believe you want, we give, you get and then you scream, oh! like a slaughtered beast is but a treat.

We answer your desire. Always.

GIRL: Let's let him go, Davy. It's wrong to keep him this way, cooped up in there like a lizard.

GUY: But what about our wish?

GIRL: We can make it come true ourselves, if we want to. We don't need a leprechaun for that.

[They kiss. The leprechaun, who's sleeping or something, hears them and wakes up. He puts his face against the glass, as if he doesn't believe what he's hearing.]

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We've all heard stories about "the one that got away." It isn't always a fish, though ...

By Sarah Tolton Illustration by Caitlin Hukwald

a FISH story

IN THE VALE OF BRECON WHERE THE FISHERMEN HUNT
the game amid deep and succulent cloud, where the yaks are pink, and where the maidens are all beautiful (with some exceptions) lived the grand old dowager, Lydia Batterfly

Lydia Batterfly's greatest regret in life was her niece, Dagmar Dagmar was neither inclined toward the practice of womanly etiquette nor sufficiently attractive to be forgiven her disinclinations. Despite attendance at finishing school for two full years, she stubbornly refused to act like a lady. Worse was her tendency to make a spectacle of herself over the most inappropriate things, most recently and deplorably, "that awful tower boy," as the dowager Batterfly referred to him.

"I don t know why you bother with him," said the dowager.

"His name is Henry," said Dagmar, "and I bother because he is *superb*."

"Not by *our* standards," said Lydia, by which she meant the standards of any sensible woman of good breeding and taste.

Henry, the bell tower boy, was nearly seventeen with limbs as long as a spider monkey's and hair so short it barely colored his scalp. He went about town in simple white clothes, displaying no familial colors—the shameful apparel of a bastard. Henry's job was to climb the tower and play the fish until their echoes rang from the valley walls. There were five fish in the tower, caught from the Sonorous River, in the days when fish swam in rivers, by one Martidel Bayliss, the greatest fisherman in Brecon history. His enormous catches had been bronzed for posterity and hung in the tower where they were twice daily made to clatter amongst themselves in a semblance of music. Henry, the current bell tower boy, was recognized as one of the better practitioners of the art of fish-clattering. Dagmar had been in love with him from the moment she'd first seen him, trousers rolled up to his knees in the Friday Bog with a frog clutched in his fist, squeezing it just hard enough to make its eyes protrude.

The greatest disappointment in Dagmar's life was that Henry did not appear to be likewise infatuated with her. She ascribed this, given her deceptively unremarkable appearance, to his simply not having noticed her. She set about to remedy this.

On the eve of the coldest night of the year, just after the last murmur of the fish jangles had died away, Dagmar stationed herself below the tower looking up at the fish chamber fifty feet above. In her hands she held her uncle's bangy-wurdle, salvaged from the dowager Batterfly's lumber room. Bangy-wurdles were the instruments of the insane, the bizarrely eccentric, and the lower classes of society. No one of good breeding would even admit to owning one. The instrument produced a music often described as "a din of iniquity."

Practicing in secret, Dagmar had spent the summer learning to master the instrument. She reasoned it thusly. A piano was too difficult to drag to the town square, and a clarinet didn't allow for singing. And sing she did. She sang a song she had composed for her love, amid daydreams of his froggy hands, his simian limbs, and his days at play among the shining fish. At the close of the second verse, as she launched into the chorus, she saw a white face thrust out from the tower window.

"What's that fuss?" said Henry. "Are you ill?"

She finished the chorus and shouted up to him, "A song professing my love for you, dear Henry. Sit back and enjoy while I serenade you." And she continued to play what was later described by the town wag as "the musical equivalent of a cat caught under a pram wheel."

Despite several pleas from around the square for Dagmar to hold her peace, she played on, singing of Henry's attributes.

"My what?" Henry shouted. "What are you saying?"

"Your glorious shining fingers," she shouted back.

There were some hoots of laughter from one of the nearby houses.

"Clear off," said Henry. "People will hear you."

"You are the most desirable man in the Vale of Brecon, and I am not going to stop until everyone knows it." Dagmar continued to play. She had not quite finished her fourth turn through the chorus when Henry, desperate to shut her up, emptied a water pail out of the tower window. The air was so cold that the cascade had nearly crystalized by the time it broke over Dagmar's head. Dagmar squeaked in shock and almost dropped the bangy-wurdle on the cobblestones.

"Now go home!" said Henry. And he banged the tower shutters closed.

Dagmar took a few moments to collect her wits, shaking the beads of ice from her coat and brushing them from the bangy-wurdle. Her hair was now frozen into points.

Lydia Batterfly's house abutted the square, and Dagmar retreated to it. There was no point in further stating her suit if Henry had closed the window. Unfortunately, as soon as she tried to open the front door, her wet hand froze fast to the metal knob. Try as she might, she could not get it free. Her shouts for assistance were met with answering shouts to shut up. Eventually, though, they drew her fondest friend, Eora, the duchess's daughter, from the house next door. Eora was one of those sensible types who are really quite wonderful in a pinch, though they tend to be dull and full of advice for living a good life at other times. On this occasion, Eora, who'd watched the entire spectacle from her bedroom window, came prepared, carrying a bowl full of hot water from the kettle. The bowl had contained some exotic fruits that were now dumped over her mother's oak dining table. Eora proceeded to pour the steaming contents of the bowl over Dagmar's hand in an attempt to loosen it from the doorknob. The major difficulty being to stop herself laughing so hard that she dropped it.

"Yes, all right, all right," said Dagmar, peeling her hand from the door handle. "It isn't funny. I mean, you have no idea what love does to a person. You'll see."

Though really, Dagmar thought, Eora was the sort of person who would fall in love—or something respectably close to it—with a suitable gentleman approved by her mother the duchess, and they would be wed in a ghastly ceremony in which Dagmar would be forced to attend in some abominable dress. Dagmar loathed dresses.

WORD GETS ABOUT IN SMALL PLACES, AND IT WASN'T long before Eora's mother, the duchess, was informing Lydia Batterfly of what Dagmar had been up to while she had been out of town.

"She's sending me back to finishing school," said Dagmar to Eora that afternoon.

"Not again! That's what ... the fourth time? What are you going to do?"

"Third, and I think she's going to find that Madame Loge will have nothing to do with me. She doesn't like to be reminded of her failings. They're so few and far between. As to what I'm going to do, I've thought of another plan."

"Plan?"

"To win Henry."

Eora stared at Dagmar and said nothing. Perhaps it was a tactful omission of words. When at last she spoke, she said, "What are you going to do?"

"Come with me and see," said Dagmar. She led the way down the center of the street, down the narrower alleyways of Brecon town, to Tyrone's Fishing Tackle Emporium.

"What on Earth?" Eora muttered.

Dagmar went inside and accosted the shop's proprietor. "I would like your best and strongest rod, please."

"Yes, madam," said the proprietor. "We have a variety of—"

"The longest one you've got."

"Oh," said the merchant, and he led her to the window of the shop from which he pulled a small brass cylinder.

"That doesn't look very large, man," said Dagmar.

"If you would come outside." The merchant stepped out into the street and proceeded to extend the rod. The mechanism was a telescopic one. The merchant pulled each joint out, lengthening it until it stretched the entire length of the alley and protruded out over the High Street sidewalk. Curious onlookers peered at it warily and walked around it.

"Well?" said the merchant.

"I suppose if that's the longest one you've got, it will have to do," said Dagmar. "How much is it?"

"Oh, madam, workmanship like this . . This is a one-of-a-kind, made on the Gwyntog Coast and designed after the one used by Martidel Bayliss who once fished with it in the ocean. It is the most beautiful piece of wo—"

"I'm amazed you're willing to part with it."

"I could be coerced," said the merchant. "But it would take a king's ransom."

"Far be it from me to part a man from his beloved rod. We'll look elsewhere, thanks."

"You will not find a larger or better rod in the entire Vale of Brecon."

"That's as may be, but I haven't got a king to ransom."

"Perhaps we could negotiate."

A price was settled, though the merchant claimed he would go bankrupt, and Dagmar claimed she would have no dowry, "Though without this, there would be no need for a dowry."

"Why, Dagmar?" said Eora. "What are you going to do?"

"I," said Dagmar, "am going to catch the Barbary Fish, and then—"

"You're out of your mind!" said the merchant. "You! The best fisherman in the history of Brecon spent his entire career trying, and even he couldn't catch the Barbary Fish."

"Please," said Dagmar. "You interrupted me. As I was saying . . I am going to catch the Barbary Fish and present him to Henry the tower boy as a token of my love."

"Dagmar . . ." said Eora.

"I know," said Dagmar. "I'll need bait."

Dagmar strode off waving her rod, now telescoped down to a more manageable twelve inches. Eora was forced to run to keep up with her. Dagmar led her to the fishing grounds at Leechfield. The day was gloriously clear, and there were several fishermen sprawled amid the long grasses, eyes following the spiderfloss of their fishing lines which disappeared into the sky, ending at their lures glinting from colorful balloons. High above them, the braver fishermen rode in baskets beneath larger balloons, harpoons held at the ready, sighting along the Vale for the cloud-wisps of fish-spoor.

Dagmar made straight for the oldest and most ragged of the veteran fishermen at Leechfield and without preamble said, "If you were to try for the Barbary Fish, where would you set your line and how would you bait your hook?"

The man looked at Dagmar and snorted. "Five miles of golden spiderfloss, four of silver. And for a lure, the blue stained glass from the window of Epiphany. And everyone knows the Barbary Fish frequents the hills at Devil's End."

"You've never tried to catch him yourself?"

"I'm not mad."

"Well then, thank you, sir," said Dagmar.

That night, someone broke the Epiphany window. It was later determined that a stone had been thrown through it. Three days after this Dagmar's aunt found the family tapestry bundled up in the cupboard under the stairs. Half of it had been unraveled, and the gold and silver threads had all been pulled out. None of the servants would own up to doing it.

Shortly afterward, Dagmar became suddenly attentive at her macramé and crochet lessons. Madame Loge began to entertain cautious hopes for her reform.

Ten days later, Dagmar appeared dripping wet at Eora's door. "You'll have to help me," said Dagmar. She led her friend to Leechfield, where a gathering of fishermen was ringed around the convex, glittering side of an enormous fish.

"Is that the Barbary—"

"Well, no, actually," said Dagmar. "But it's quite a respectable one, I think. It dragged me across Leechfield and all along the Sonorous River. Do you see this?" Dagmar proudly displayed a missing tooth. "Came out when I hit the Bridge. No one warned me it might take me up. Anyway, it dropped me in the sea and I suppose it expected me to let go, but I wasn't going to give it the satisfaction. I wormed it about a bit, then it seemed to tire, enough that I could wind it in close enough to start biffing and kicking it. It got the message and went to ground here. Which was lucky, as I didn't fancy landing in the quarry."

"What are you going to do with it?" said Eora.

"Have it bronzed, of course. It's easily bigger than any of the ones in the tower now."

Eora's eyes grew wide, but she didn't comment. The look of fanatical determination in Dagmar's eyes stilled her tongue.

> "No one warned me it might take me up. Anyway, it dropped me in the sea and I suppose it expected me to let go, but I wasn't going to give it the satisfaction."

HENRY, AS IT HAPPENED, WAS neither pleased nor impressed when Dagmar, accompanied by a parade of dancing acrobats and men in military costume, presented the bronzed fish to him at the door of the tower.

"That won't fit up the steps," he said.

"We'll hoist it from outside," said Dagmar. "This is a gift to you, a token of my esteem."

"Look," said Henry. He glanced at the acrobats somersaulting crosswise in front of him and lowered his voice. "Stop doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Giving me things, publicly declaring your feelings for me."

"Martidel Bayliss didn't stop trying to catch the Barbary Fish and look at him."

"Right, but he never caught it, though, did he?" said Henry.

"No, but he spent his *entire life* trying. Isn't that utterly marvelous? That is dedication, Henry, as I am dedicated in my love for you."

"But I don't love you. I don't even like you. What you're doing ... It's embarrassing me. It's insulting. Stop it."

Dagmar's face fell, and her brow furrowed in thought. "Very well." She bowed. "But take the fish."

"SO, YOU HAVE SEEN SENSE AT LAST," SAID EORA AS they sipped wine in the conservatory.

Dagmar shrugged. "If you mean have I given up, then no. Not at all."

"But he ordered you to leave him alone."

"Ah, yes. And that is because I have not done enough to earn his love. I have not sacrificed enough. I have not suffered enough."

"And you think he has not suffered enough either," Eora sighed. "This is fatuous. It's senseless."

"No. Senseless is in the country of Giving Up. What is the purpose of living if I can't pursue him? If I stopped, it would mean I didn't really love him. And I do."

"He says he doesn't love you."

"If he really believes that ..."

"Yes?" Eora leaned closer.

"... then I haven't been trying hard enough."

Exasperated, Eora proclaimed, "A woman pursuing a man is a scandal. I think you are doing it to mortify your Aunt Lydia."

"I am doing it for the glory," said Dagmar. "A glory most women are afraid to taste."

FOR A FEW WEEKS NOTHING NEW transpired, except that Dagmar began to pay rapt attention to her art instructor. Then one morning a large mural was found covering the front of Dagmar's house. It depicted a man, endowed with yak-like proportions, strutting atop an enormous tower from which a golden fish hung.

The next day, Henry of the bell tower asked the swineherd's daughter to marry him.

"Now, even you must admit defeat," said Eora.

"Not at all," said Dagmar. "This girl, what do you know about her?"

"She's very beautiful."

"Ah," said Dagmar, "but did she earn her beauty, or did she happen upon it by way of the womb? What has she done to be *worthy* of Henry?"

"Well, nothing," said Eora, "except I suppose that he likes her. And perhaps she was patient enough to let him make up his own mind about that, and doesn't wake him at midnight singing his praises, or drop uninvited fish and acrobats in his lap."

"No," said Dagmar. "It can't be that simple. If he truly believes he loves her, then it's because I haven't tried hard enough."

EORA HAPPENED TO MEET HENRY IN Evelyn Street the next afternoon. They greeted each other cordially, if cautiously, like two people who share an embarrassing complaint.

"It won't work," said Eora. "I mean, if that's why you've done it."

"What?"

"Proposing to another girl. In fact, I think you've spurred her on to try even harder to win you."

"Tell her from me that she can go to hell," Henry muttered. "Tell her I'll send her there myself if she doesn't stop it." He stalked off.

Eora went off to do as he asked, but at the door to Dagmar's house, she stopped. Her hand, lifted to tap on the door, dropped to her side, and she regarded it pensively. What was the use talking to Dagmar? She wouldn't listen to reason.

A FEW DAYS LATER, DAGMAR WAS sitting on the bank of the Sonorous River, working out a plot to stop Henry's wedding.

She was planning the speech she would make when the minister asked if there were any objections to the wedding. Of course there were. Anyone could see that Henry had become engaged solely to annoy her and not because he loved this other girl.

Dagmar was deep in thought writing her speech when a shadow fell across the parchment. She looked up, but instead of an obtrusive cloud, she saw a man looming over her.

"You're in my light," said Dagmar. "Move off."

"You are my light," said the man.

Dagmar, whose head had bowed to the task of writing almost before the words were out of her mouth, looked up suddenly. "What?"

"Lady for whose sake alone I breathe, listen while I tell you that I adore you."

It was the fisherman from Leechfield. The old, ragged man who'd told her about baiting hooks.

"You're cracked!" said Dagmar. "You're twice my age for a start. And anyway, in case you hadn't noticed, and you must be deaf, mad, and stupid if you haven't, I'm in love with Henry the tower boy."

"Henry is engaged to the swineherd's daughter."

"That's what he thinks," said Dagmar, standing up and brushing the heads of grasses from her cloak.

"He is betrothed," said the fisherman, "whereas I am not. We are better suited to each other." He began to follow Dagmar as she made her way back to the square.

"Don't you have fish to catch?" said Dagmar.

"None more beautiful than you, and none more sly and worthy than you." As they walked, the fisherman's voice rose so that people in the square turned to watch them.

"Look," said Dagmar, rounding on him, "Look here, back off. I've told you to go. Everyone knows where my heart belongs."

The fisherman fell to his knees. "Most glorious girl, listen to me while I declare my love for you in front of these people, for no one could be more worthy of a fisherman's love than the woman who tried for the Barbary Fish."

"Yes, yes, all right. Everyone knows I didn't get him, but thanks for bringing it to their attention. Now clear off."

The fisherman grabbed hold of the hem of Dagmar's cloak so that she had to jerk it free. She turned and stalked off.

The fisherman followed her, tossing glass-glazed fish scales over her head. "A tribute," he said.

Someone nearby sniggered. Dagmar had to make an undignified run to her house, slamming and bolting the door behind her.

"IT ISN'T FUNNY, EORA," SAID DAGMAR. She had to raise her voice to be heard over the wailing coming from below the window as the Leechfield fisherman serenaded her.

"I think it's romantic," said Eora. "Why don't you consider him?"

"Look, Eora, there are two kinds of people in the world. The Pursuers and the Pursued. And the Pursuers neither like nor wish to be pursued. It is an insult to their nature."

"I heard that Henry proposed to the swineherd's daughter," said Eora. "She didn't pursue him at all."

Dagmar frowned. "Do you know, that man is singing off-key. I didn't sing off-key when I serenaded Henry ... did I?"

Eora shrugged. "I couldn't really tell over Henry's shouting at you to shut up."

"And at least I composed an original song," said Dagmar. "This raving nit is borrowing an old chestnut and trotting it out like it's the latest thing. He's doing a poor job of it all around." Dagmar shot to her feet and marched to the bathroom, filled a tub with the coldest water she could manage, and wrestled it back to the window. She tipped the water out of the window onto the singing fisherman.

"Hmmm," she said. "Perhaps I ought to learn from my own mishaps."

Eora brightened. "Yes!"

Then Dagmar picked up the potted plant next to the window and tipped it out over the ledge as well. "Yes, the water makes the soil stick quite well," she said, peering down. "It does pay to learn from one's mistakes."

THE NEXT DAY IN CHURCH, the Leechfield fisherman presented Dagmar with a garland of the finest cerise yak's hair. Yak's hair garlands were considered de rigueur at the time. Dagmar stood up in the pew and shouted, "Stop! I cannot think of anything more annoying, more aggravating, more infuriating than your pursuit of me when I have clearly told you that I am not interested. You are an ass. An ass's ass, and your attention to me is insulting." As she said this, her eyes happened upon Henry standing by the door to the tower, about to ring his fish to signify the end of the service.

Dagmar's cheeks turned a shade reminiscent of the most fashionable yak's hair, and she walked out.

Henry married the swineherd's daughter without incident and they lived in comfortable married squabblehood, his wife being unencumbered with the notion that she had married a perfect man.

Dagmar failed finishing school in spectacular fashion for the third time and finished up a merry spinster, living on the outskirts of town. On fine days, she can sometimes be seen using her famous brass rod. She has yet to catch the Barbary Fish.

The Leechfield fisherman moved to the City where he bought a suite of rooms in one of the city towers from which the trawling was more rewarding than from his former, cheaper lodgings in a down-to-earth bungalow. It was an expensive purchase, but affordable to one who has benefited from the dowry of a duchess's daughter.

The fish served at Eora's wedding fed six hundred people. ❧

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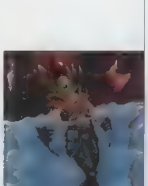
By Eric T. Baker

Fans of *X-Men III* and *The Da Vinci Code* can explore those universes in new games.



The more of an X-Men fan the players are, the more likely they are to enjoy ***X-Men III: The Official Game,*** which is new from Activision for the PC, PS2, Xbox, and 360 Xbox. In each level of the game players take the role of either Wolverine, Nightcrawler, or Iceman. To be clear, the levels are designed for specific characters; the players aren't given a choice of who they will be for each level. On some levels the players characters are joined by other X-Men that the AI controls, although usually they have a power, such as Storm's lightning bolts, that the player can call on them to cast.

There is nothing innovative about the game play of *X-M:OG*. Each character has specific powers that the player can increase in effectiveness as the game goes along. In fact, the greater the difficulty (it can be set at the beginning of each level) a level is completed at, the more "mutations" the player earns for that character. Wolverine has his claws and his healing and he fights his way through his levels, mixing fast attacks and power attacks with combos. Nightcrawler has an extremely easy to use teleportation mechanic he uses to move about and fight. Iceman spends all of his levels riding an ice slide, so controlling him feels like playing a rail shooter game.

Set between the second and third movies, *X-M:OG* explains why Nightcrawler isn't in the third movie, but doesn't add much else to the franchise's story. What story the game contains is largely shown in the cutscenes, which players will most likely either love or hate. Instead of being fully animated either with the game engine or with a graphics program, the scenes are composed of 2-D drawings of which some parts are animated, although notably not the characters' mouths when they talk. Players who really love any or all of the three playable characters will probably enjoy the chance this game gives them to beat up things with those characters, but because of the lacking story and the by-the-numbers game play, this isn't a game for casual fans of the franchise.

Speaking of franchises, 2K has put out a video game version of ***The Da Vinci Code*** for the Xbox, PS2, and PC. As with the movie, the game is an adaptation of the book by Dan Brown. Many things are the same, but many of the puzzles and most of the fights are brand new. The game begins with a murder in the Louvre and before the first cutscene is over symbologist Robert Langdon has been brought in to consult on the case. He's barely started investigating the body before cryptographer Sophie Neveu arrives, giving the players the two skill sets they need to solve all the puzzles that make up the game.

In form and game play, *DVC* is like a classic adventure game. The player moves the characters from room to room and location to location. In each new environment the player moves the pointer over

ABOVE: Dissension *is the latest card set in the Magic: The Gathering line. RIGHT: Players take the roles of Nightcrawler, Iceman, or Wolverine in* X-Men III: The Official Game

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"Alan M. Brooker has taken the Sci-Fi genre, weaved in some romance and created a fantastic melding of the two."
Tina Ryan, [illegible]

everything on the screen and interacts with anything that makes the pointer light up. Some things are collected, some are moved, some are switched on or off, and so on, until the player has the next bit needed to trigger the next cutscene and move the game along. As befits its source material, *DVC* has very long, very talky cutscenes. The designers are trying to not only tell a story, but also unveil a wild and intricate historical mystery.

One nontraditional thing about *DVC* is that very few adventure games include combat, but this one does. It is mostly hand-to-hand fights between the main characters and various policemen and monks. Mechanically, buttons appear at the bottom of the screen. If the player pushes them within the time limit in the displayed order, he or she is rewarded with the character executing a combo attack against the enemy. When the enemy attacks in turn, the player again presses a sequence of buttons. Getting it right avoids the enemy's attack. This system allows players with slower hand-eye coordination to pull off some impressive moves, but after the first few fights, most players will find combat just an inconvenience keeping them from the interesting part of the game, which is solving the puzzles.

The Voyage of the Golden Dragon is a stand-alone adventure module set in the Dungeons & Dragons Eberron campaign world for around four players of 7th level. It includes four connected scenarios, three of which are set on the luxury passenger airship of the title. At 32 pages, it is a brisk and minimalist trot through the events and characters of each scenario, but at the same time it is artfully constructed to make the best use of its small space. Adventure modules remain one of the best values in gaming since a very high percentage of their content will actually be used by the Dungeon Master who buys it, and they are ready to go without any lengthy prep work. A Dungeon Master could buy this book on his or her way to a gaming session and run it immediately.

Conceived as a warship, The Golden Dragon wasn't completed before the end of the war. Purchased by private interests, it was finished as a luxury liner with dining, casino,

and spa all available to the passengers. The first scenario is a *Die Hard*-style hostage takeover on the night of the launch party. The second scenario is a *Road to Babel*-style murder mystery. The third scenario takes place off the ship, in an abandoned citadel, and then the final events are back aboard and take the form of an all-out sky battle.

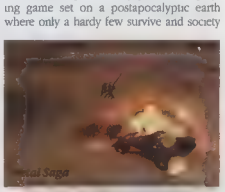
Thanks to its limited setting, *VotGD* doesn't need many maps. It also has a fairly small roster of NPCs, but they are all given statistics and suggestions for play. The most important of them also get pictures. The terms of each scenario are laid out economically. DMs will find themselves filling in lots of little details as play progresses, but all the big and important facts are in the book. The only glaring omission from *VotGD* is an aesthetic one: While there is a map of the ship, there is no picture of it.

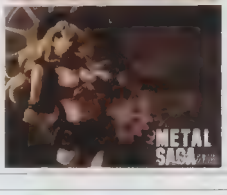
One of the strongest and most inventive franchises in pen and dice role-playing games, *Exalted* is now in its second edition. ***Exalted Second Edition: Storytellers Companion*** from White Wolf is one of the first books out under the revised rules. The *Exalted* universe is one of heroic fantasy, with an original background that owes more to Chinese mythology and Japanese anime than it does to medieval Europe and J.R.R. Tolkien. The game posits that the world was once ruled by super powered demigods called Solars. The Solars commanded many ranks of lesser powered but still formidable heroes, the most numerous of these being the Dragon-Blooded. A thousand years before the era of the game, the Dragon-Blooded rebelled against the Solars and massacred them. Now the Dragon-Blooded have lost their Empress, the Deathlords have begun to raise deathknights (beings as powerful as any Solar), the Fates have unleashed their own heroes to battle for a restoration of destiny, and the Solars have begun to rise again.

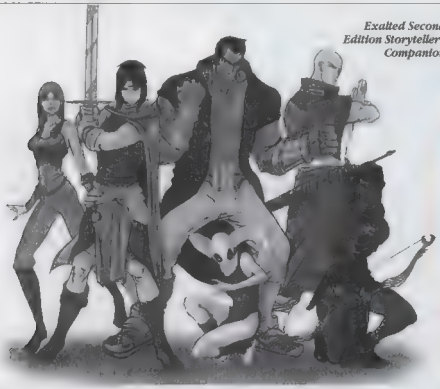
The basic *Exalted* rule book is for players and Game Masters to read and lays out the mechanics of the game engine as well as all the generalities of the world needed to play. Character creation-wise, however, its focus is on the Solars. *The Storytellers Companion* is just for Game Masters and it gives them the information they need for crafting antagonists to the players' Solars. The chapter on the Dragon-Blooded is typical in that it has six pages of general description of the faction, four pages of sample characters, and 20 pages of descriptions of abilities that are available to Dragon-Blooded characters. There are chapters for the Lunar Exalted, the Sidereal Exalted, the Abyssal Exalted (which contains short descriptions of nine of the 13 DeathLords), and a shorter chapter on the Solars with some sample characters and some artifacts.

The final 26 pages of the book's 156 pages are devoted to the rules of a mini-game for playing inside an *Exalted* campaign. Called "The Mandate of Heaven," this game puts each player (although not always the character) in charge of a Dominion inside the range of the campaign which is then played for a month or a season or a year. The purpose is to give the players a role in determining the path of the world in which their characters exist. The mechanic for doing this to treat each Dominion as a character itself, giving it statistics and skills and abilities and having it roll against other Dominions for the effects the players want. Overall, this is a pretty cool idea, and it works as long as the players treat it for what it is: a simple mechanic for establishing some broad story points.

Metal Saga by Crea-Tech from Atlus for the PS2 is an open-ended Japanese role-playing game set on a postapocalyptic earth where only a hardy few survive and society







Exalted Second Edition Storytellers Companion

is organized around three main types of surviving humans: Hunters, Mechanics, and Outlaws. Hunters fight the monsters and look for salvage from the pre-apocalypse world. Mechanics keep the Hunters' tanks working and fully armed. Outlaws give the Hunters a primary source of income by being worth bounties when they are captured.

In typical RPG fashion, players start in the role of young boy, although they can name him whatever they like. The first possible ending for the game then comes about two minutes in; if the player has the boy agree with his mother's concerns and decides to become a Mechanic instead of a Hunter, then there are a couple of dialogue scenes and the game ends. This is the first of several endings in *MS*, as the game is perhaps the most "open" RPG to come out of Japan this year. There is no over-arching plot beyond exploring the world and leveling the hero. There are quests for Outlaws, a few different girls to romance, and lots and lots of items to find on top of possibly getting all 15 different tanks. And a genetically altered fighting dog. And finding all the different spots where dialogue choices can end the game, and seeing all those endings about nine different ones in all.

The thing that makes *MS* the most challenging is that there is no map in the dungeons. There is a world map that helps players move from place to place, and in fact one of the things that *MS* does well is (once the player's character has installed a teleport item) let the player teleport back to places he's already been, saving a lot of random battles. Once the character is in a dungeon, however, players will have to map by hand to be sure they've completed it. An in-game map would have made things much simpler. In addition, players should not be shy about seeking help from the game's fan community. There are several tips that can make the game much, much more enjoyable, the most important being how to turn off a party member's auto skill.

The latest card set in the *Magic the Gathering* line is ***Dissension,*** which joins *Ravnica: City of Guilds* and *Guildpact* to finish the story of the plane/city that is Ravnica. Ten thousand years prior to the start of the game, the city was in a constant state of war between its 10 most powerful factions or guilds. Eventually, the factions were able to come together and create an enchantment that preserves the power of each guild by subtlety interfering with everyone's plans equally. The value of this sort of setup in a card game is obvious.

There are three guilds in this set of cards. The Azorus Senate, who seem to be based on the Roman senate, are dedicated to maintaining the status quo in the city. They are led by Grand Arbiter Augustin IV, and their special mechanic, called Forecast, allows them to boost the power of certain cards during the upkeep round. The second guild is the Cult of Rakdos, named for its leader, Rakdos, the Defiler, a demon. This is a chaos cult whose existence is allowed by the other guilds because they use its members as mercenaries. Their game power is called Hellbent and allows certain cards to be more powerful when their controller has no cards in his hand. The third guild in this set is the Simic Combine. Originally they wanted to preserve what the city had not devoured. They failed at that, so now they breed new creatures that are capable of living in the city itself. Their leader is an elvish biomancer, Momir Vig, and their power is called Graft, which allows certain of their cards to come into play with +1/+1 equal to their ability score.

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Gallery

Continued from page 73

After all the model and picture work is done, Greg and Tim do some more sketches based on the developed pictures, relying much more on the models, costumes and "photographic references for what we've gathered—background, trees, building, whatever—and then do a final drawing." At this point, if it's commission- or business-related, the customer or the art director and editor must give his or her approval before the painting process begins.

Finally comes the actual process of painting. "What that's about—with the *Rings*, for example—we transfer the drawing (or a xerox copy) to the board (usually masonite) with a ballpoint pen and graphite carbon paper. Then we mix the colors, generally the background first." The general rule Greg and Tim both adhere to for the most part is working from the background to the foreground, with the central characters being painted last.

"We work it back and forth like that. The *Ring* paintings were pretty large so we'd put the palette in the middle, the painting on a big easel, and sit on either side of the palette. We'd both paint at the same time."

Since they primarily work in acrylics, Greg and Tim mix up a large amount of varying colors and their values on pieces of aluminum foil, then store them in Tupperware containers. When opened again, Greg just sprays the paint with some water from a plant mister and it's ready to go. This saves them from the major headache of mixing up the same colors and trying to match the exact same values each day since acrylic paint dries fast.

Through his and Tim's official Web site (www.brothershildebrandt.com) or through the Spiderweb Art Gallery (www.spiderwebart.com), Greg continues to work nonstop, selling works through the sites and in book stores, taking on private commissions for publishing houses, and creating personal works. He's done over sixty paintings called *American Beauties* that are representative of the classic pin-up girls from the 1930s and 1940s and continues to do more in the series. At the same time, the brothers still do private commissions and work for other companies—including record producer, composer, and performer Paul O'Neill and the Trans-Siberian Orchestra. Greg designed the album cover for the Christmas show and concert. O'Neill puts on every year, and will be illustrating the book *Beethoven's Last Night*, written by O'Neill, as well.

With the excitement of Peter Jackson's movies destined to reverberate for years among fans, Greg and Tim Hildebrandt continue to be a force in the world of fantasy art—a force that has earned them a position among the greatest of modern-day fantasy artists! ❧

Myths & Legends

Continued from page 79

GUY You're right, Elise. We'll take him back to where we found him and just let him go. OK? [He taps the glass.. You want to go back?

LEPRECHAUN [smiles at them] No, let me go right here.

GUY OK. [He puts out his hand but the GIRL grabs it back.

GIRL No, don't! What if it's a trick?

LEPRECHAUN [still smiling] Why would I want to play a trick on two nice kids like you? You're going to let me go, right? Maybe I can grant your wish after all.

GIRL [firmly] No, thanks.

GUY You're right again, Elise. Let's take him back to the woods. [He picks up the aquarium cage.] Let's go, buddy.

CURTAIN

So they take him back to the woods right, and let him go—and then what? Run back to their car that's what I would do anyway. Run like hell and don't look back. And don't forget to wear your seatbelt on the way home.

That's the other thing that bugs me about these stories you know? I mean all these myths and stuff, the people in them are always like, *Oh, ho-hum, I met a leprechaun today*, like it's nothing out of the ordinary. I mean, even if the leprechaun doesn't screw you over for life it's still pretty scary, don't you think? Just to *meet* a leprechaun, or Loki, or even Cupid—he's got *arrows*, doesn't he?—to meet some kind of supernatural or extraterrestrial being—even if they don't actually do anything to you—that's *scary*, isn't it? You'd be minding your own business in the woods, gathering sticks or something, and then this bizarre creature crosses your path and even if you end up getting away OK it's still like, Hey, what just *happened* here? And what if it happens again? Or something even worse? Wouldn't it make you, I don't know, kind of jumpy afterward? Kind of terrified? As if you'd found out what things were *really* like out there in the woods?

Twelve fifty four. I should stop now. I'm done anyway and I have to be up by six. I hit SAVE, think about checking my e-mail, decide against it. In the kitchen, something makes a buzzy, thumpy sound, the refrigerator, turning off? or on? Was it the refrigerator? Maybe it's my brother come down for his fiftieth snack of the day. Or my mom, checking the back door again. My dad's in Sausalito, he won't be back until Thursday. It's just the three of us home tonight.

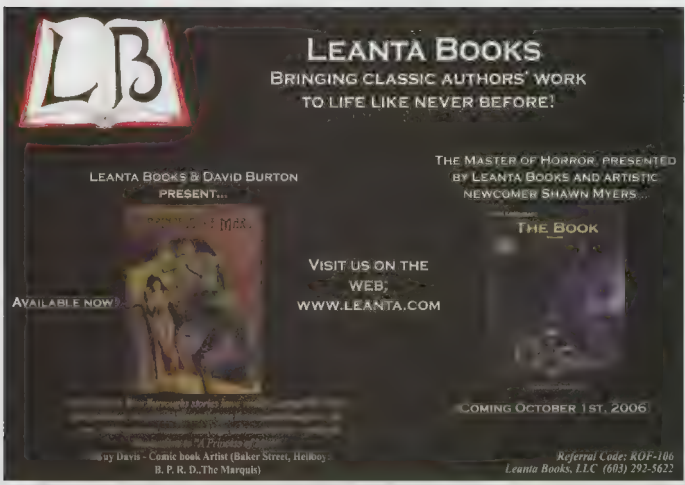
I yawn. My eyes are dry and I'm thirsty, really thirsty, for a soda or water or something. But then I'd have to go into the kitchen, dark kitchen. What's wrong with going in the kitchen? Did I freak myself out with my own stupid play?

When I shut off the computer, my room will go dark, too. Aquarium light. I kept my lizards for a whole year, almost, but then they died. All at once, like they'd all decided that they were tired of living or something. I came home to feed them after school like I always did, and there they were, just lying there staring at me with their black eyes. I cried and cried, and my dad helped me bury them out by the fish pond.

But what nobody ever knew, what I never told anyone, was when I saw them first, there in their glass box, I screamed. Not because they looked dead. Because they looked mad. At me.

Maybe I'm not that thirsty. Maybe I'll just go to bed.

We are not evil, we of the fire; we are not good. We are that is enough for you to know, mud beart, there in your but tug-house that could not withstand one-hundredth of our heat but we let you go, we have much to do and so little of it in your woods, your world, your blue sphere that rotates in this dark so great no one, not even we, can glimpse its end. We ride that dark, we gather what we need, we take what we deserve: our spoils your dreams, your breathing infants, your courage in the night. Behind the air that wavers like glass our black eyes watch you, touch you, burn you. We grow wild in the wild places, and all places, now, are wild.



Dead Man's Tale

Continued from page 45

"OK, somebody wants something that they can get if Talaj isn't around. The police think Chen wants money, but everyone else thinks that all he wants is to please Talaj The developers want the land Talaj owns. They could be holding him hostage to get it " My companion continued to smoke, staring out at his weed-filled lawn "Wait a minute, you were trying to warn Chen what the problem was that night in the garage, but he wasn't taking the hint. He thought he had everything under control. So it can't be about the land That would be something he'd have told the police about. It's something else, something he thinks is going along just fine without Talaj around ... oh, the baby." A shadow passed over the sun, startling me. "How much time have I wasted on this conversation."

"It's OK. We were running on your time "

Relieved, I got up and headed for number 8 Ledgecliffe. My companion tamped out his pipe and went back in his house.

When Mr. Ruth opened the door I practically bulled him aside Striding into the foyer I pulled the blocky shaped calligraphy off the wall. I stared at it through slitted eyes. It could be Cyrillic.

Behind me, Mr. Ruth was making protesting noises. I cut him off. "Get your wife."

"I don't know what right you have to barge in here and make demands "

"Your wife is holding Talaj's spirit captive in this calligraphy. Get her now."

His eyes got wide with horror and he disappeared into the back of the house. Shortly there was the sound of a heated discussion

I picked up the phone and called the DA's office After explaining my way up the ladder I found myself talking to an assistant DA "Take the stasis spell off Talaj for about an hour," I told her

She protested.

"Look, I figured out what happened to him, and I'm going to get him reanimated. You have to take the spell off so it'll work."

More protests.

"It's only going to cost you a phone call to get it done now. If Mr. Talaj has to wait until your next scheduled stasis break, he might decide to sue you for false imprisonment ..."

I got her grudging consent.

Shortly, a tearful Barbara Ruth walked in the room. "I would never have hurt them. I just wanted them out of the way until the baby was born. I know Rhea has no interest in raising a child She would have put it in foster care, and we're the next adoptive parents on the list " She took the calligraphy from my hands. "Besides, there is no way Stazi wants to raise a kid, no matter what Chen thinks. I was doing them a favor "

"How did you know about the baby?"

"I can practically smell pregnant women now. It's such a curse not being able to have one of my own And the way she and Chen exchanged conspiratorial glances the last time we were over there, I was sure they were doing it behind Staz's back. Then, one hot night I was working late in the studio out back. I had the windows open, and so did Stazi and Chen I heard them getting ready for their latest exploit Chen was checking one last time to be sure that Stazi wouldn't take more than a couple of months to reassemble Told him he had a great surprise planned for his birthday. That's when I figured it out. And I was sitting there with the brush in my hand. I just caught him on paper as he left his body " She looked apologetically at the calligraphy

"You've got to let him go." I said it gently.

She wiped her eyes and nodded. Jim Ruth and I followed her into the studio. She took the calligraphy out of its blood-red silk border and laid it carefully on her work table. Then with water and a brush, she went over the whole piece, washing out the words holding Talaj prisoner When the pattern was no longer recognizable, I took my leave.

I should have gone home, but that might have cost me my rating on NaughtyandNice.com. So I drove down to the village, had some lunch, and drove back to number 10. The wheels of justice were unusually fast today, perhaps greased by my threat of potential lawsuits. I only had to sit there about a half an hour before Chen and Talaj drove up with Rhea in her car.

Talaj looked angry as he got out, and Chen and Rhea were having a quiet argument in the car. Stalked across his front lawn, not even seeing me until he found me blocking his way into the house He stopped and looked me over from my button-down shirt to my no-name chinos, finding me wanting. "Who the hell are you?"

"Oh, that's the detective I was telling you about. The one who figured out what happened to you." Rhea had gotten out of the car and followed Talaj to the door, with a chastened looking Chen at her heels

"I suppose you want to be paid?" Talaj turned his "Powerful Man" aura on me again

"Nope, the UADA is picking up the bill. You might want to talk to them about proper legal documentation to protect your lovers from prosecution."

He harrumphed, pushed past me, and pulled out his keys to unlock the door "I need to talk to Chen alone "

I put my hand on his arm to detain him. "Listen, about the baby "

"Do you know everything about my life?" He roared at me

"I didn't have time for that Besides, a bunch of people in New York weren't talking But I do know about the baby and .. "

He turned on Chen. "It's bad enough you came up with the fool idea about having a baby, but now random strangers know about it."

"I thought you wanted a baby." Chen was whining pluntively.

"What ever gave you that idea?"

"You said you liked having young things around the house."

"Chen, I'm over 800 years old; anyone under 100 is a young thing around the house."

Just then the Ruths came out of their house. Barbara was crying again. They headed over.

"How can I ever apologize Stazi? It ... it was the wrong thing to do."

I expected Talaj to cut her out of his life with a few angry words, but instead he was looking at her with what seemed to be respect.

"I have always believed that you were a powerful artist, Barbara. But to actually experience it, from inside the art. We must talk about some gallery contacts I have in New York "

The Ruths stood there, stunned, not knowing what to say.

Talaj opened the door. "Now if you'd all excuse me, I'd like to talk to Chen alone " He beckoned to a very subdued looking Chen

I tried again "I think I can help."

Mr Hudson, or whatever his real name was, from next door appeared among us Talaj ignored him and concentrated on me

"I'm sure I can handle this myself "

"Sure, you can. But isn't it quicker if you just forgive Chen and offer the Ruths the kid, assuming Rhea approves, rather than getting a whole bunch of people upset trying to figure out what you're going to do?" There, I finally got it out

He blinked at me, then directed his attention to Barbara and Jim. "Do you really want Chen and Rhea's baby?"

"It could be yours," Rhea contributed

"Actually, it can't. I'm infertile "

"Well, if you'd told me that I would never have done this " Chen was clearly wounded by this piece of information. "I wanted a kid that looked like you."

"Umm," Mr. Ruth was unsure how to proceed. "We'd be glad to adopt it if no one else wants to "

"That would be great " Rhea sounded relieved. "I was afraid that I was going to get stuck with it "

"Perhaps now that that's all settled I can invite you all bowling?" Mr. Hudson joined the conversation. "People who are prospective parents, natural or adoptive, bowl for free on Thursdays "

I declined with thanks. It wasn't just that I would have had to pay, though I was glad that my client was the UADA and not one of the parties involved. My bank account was low, and I suspected that getting payment out of any of them might have taken a while since they all were taking Mr. Hudson up on his offer It was just that I had plans for the evening, and for the next couple years as well ❧

sunday

Continued from page 54

air. Mama blinked, and then turned eyes of fire upon Papa. Sunday tried to imagine what thoughts raced behind those eyes. Her own husband had lied to her, and kept that lie safe for over a decade simply to dwell in his own petty hatred. The medallion that had returned to them after so long had indeed marked Jack's death… but that mark was the punctuation at the end of a life, a life she had never known he had. The songs written after Jack's disappearance were true. Her son had lived. And she had been the worse betrayed.

"You will not marry my daughter." Papa's command did not carry the strength of his previous rantings.

Mama's hand dropped from Papa's chest. "Yes." The one word dripped ice and cut like a razor. "Yes, he will. It has been said. The words have been spoken. And not even you can change that, Jack Woodcutter."

In Sunday's heart glimmered a spark of hope she had thought long dead.

Mama took her hand. "Sunday, do you love this man?"

Sunday loved him as a man and a frog and a prince; she loved him with all her heart as surely as she loved her own family.

"Yes, I do."

Mama placed Sunday's hand inside Rumbold's. "Then you have our blessing."

As if someone were moving his head, Papa nodded. Without another word, he turned and headed into the Wood. Mama led her daughters into the house. Prince Rumbold and Sunday found themselves alone in the yard. Trix rustled above them in his treehouse.

Sunday and her prince stared at each other for a very long time.

"I have something for you," he said finally. "You do?"

He nodded. "You seemed to have misplaced a recurring theme." From behind his back he produced Sunday's silver and gold slipper from the night before. "I felt it was only proper to return it."

Sunday laughed, and with that laugh the birds sang and the sun shone and the flowers bloomed. Hope blossomed inside her, and she felt alive once again.

"I cannot promise you a happy ending," she admitted. A tendril of the magic beanstalk curled around her finger and a leaf opened up in her hand. "But I can promise you an interesting life."

"A man could not hope for a better future."

They smiled at each other.

"If I may be so bold, Miss Woodcutter…" he started.

"Please, call me Sunday."

"Sunday," he smiled again. "Do you think you could find it in your heart to kiss me?"

Sunday had wondered how long it would take before he got around to asking.

FOLKROOTS

Continued from page 24

whose denizens have only dust and ash for their food. In Danielewski's hands the house becomes a symbol of a vast existential void devouring the relationship of the family that owns it, an emptiness of meaning. There is no literal link to the grave, no god of the dead, no ghosts, nothing so simple, but the sense of absence, of loss, is palpable, the loss of a marriage, the loss of a mother to madness; it is a house of sorrow.

The house of the dead, Ereshkigal's Kur, the grave is a place of no return, so the myth of Orpheus tells us. We cannot bring the dead back; Eurydike is lost forever. Surely these tales of death and rebirth—Inanna, Persephone, Dumuzi, Christ—surely these are lies, then? Surely they are refusals of the gut-wrenching reality of death? In a way they may be, but one might also see in them a truer story, a story of sorrow—of the demons of despair, the harrowing of hell, the stripping of the flesh, the loss of affect, the tears and lamentations. And if one sees, in these tales, not the loss and return of a loved one, but rather that of the survivor's soul, then all those resurrections and rebirths may well be offering a more deliverable promise: a restoration at the end of this dark journey of grief…

A return from the maze of death we follow our loved ones into when they die.

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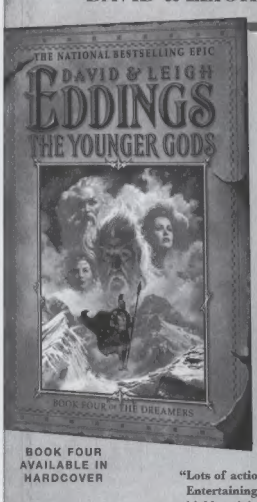

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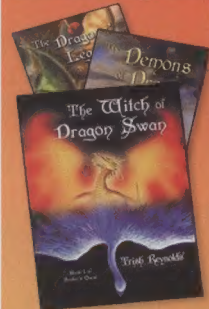

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TELEVISION

Continued from page 13

"Even in a show like *Tales from the Crypt*, which was anthological and had a lot of really good filmmakers involved, those scripts were developed in-house. There was not a sameness to it, but there was a look that they went for that was a *Tales from the Crypt* look. And we don't impose any of that. We encourage the filmmakers to make the episodes their own, and they're really responding to that and making individual movies. Even if they didn't develop the script themselves, once they take over and get their visual style and pacing or their sense of humor, it's really easy to look at an episode and say, 'That's John Carpenter. Or Tobe Hooper or John Landis or Joe Dante.'

"It's *Twilight Zone*, it's *Outer Limits*, it's *Tales from the Crypt*—but it's maybe pieces of all of those, because they're just so different, and I think that's the best thing about it."

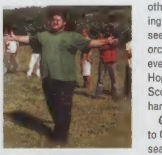
Garris notes that Season 2 will be more of the same—meaning, expect the unexpected. But what are his hopes for the future?

"All I hope is that it goes as long as it could be wonderful. As long as there are people who are expert in the genre and love it and care about it and have shown an expertise, and as long as the films are really good, I want it to keep going. I would hate to see it cannibalize itself and just become a generic thing. I'm sure there are people who are involved who would love it to go for 10 or 15 years, and that would be great if it were 10 or 15 years of great movies. But if it starts repeating itself or if some of these masters are not interested in continuing, then the blush fades from the rose, and let's please put a stake through its heart.

"It's healthy right now, and we're doing a second season that might be even better than the first season. So here's hoping that we can keep it as fresh and exciting and scary for a while to come. We're not making these entirely for ourselves, we're making them because we're members of the audience, too. And we like horror movies. We're proud of horror movies, and we're not ashamed to be in that gutter."

FALL TV 2006 PREVIEW

Even though four out of six of last year's new fantasy/horror series failed (*The Night Stalker*, *Threshold*, *Surface*, and *Invasion*), the networks are daring to stretch their creative muscles again with a few new series. And while mainstays like *Charmed* and *Alias* have ended their runs, most established series



are returning for another season.

On ABC, ***Lost*** returns for a third season. There's also a new series called ***Six Degrees***, created by the producers of *Lost* and *Alias*. It's based on the concept of six degrees of separation, meaning, any two people on this planet are connected to each other in some way by no less than a chain of six people. It's an idea that has spawned a movie and stage play (*Six Degrees of Separation*), as well as the game *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*, where the goal is to connect actors to Kevin Bacon through movies in which they've starred. But the TV show focuses on six characters who don't know each other—and yet their decisions and actions have a profound impact on each other. As they go about living normal lives, there seems to be something orchestrating their fates, even in the face of free will. Hope Davis, Campbell Scott, and Bridget Moynahan stars.

Ghost Whisperer returns to CBS for its sophomore season. Also on CBS, Skeet Ulrich stars in a new series called ***Jericho*** about a small and isolated town in Kansas. When a strange explosion happens in the distance, fear and chaos take over. Cut off from outside help, the once quiet and peaceful town of Jericho becomes mysterious and unfamiliar.

NBC moves ***Medium*** to Sunday nights, and the series may not return until mid-season. But ***Heroes*** is a

new series about ordinary people who wake up one morning and discover they suddenly have some kind of superpower. The series is about these overnight superheroes and how they may be called upon to save the world.

A mid-season replacement show on NBC is ***Raines***, about a cop who solves murders, thanks to his visions of the victims. He thinks it's his imagination, although he—and his colleagues—sometimes question his sanity. However, that doesn't stop Raines from having conversations with the dead victims and working with them to solve the crime.

Smallville is slated to return for its sixth season, and ***Supernatural*** begins its second season.

Resa Nelson

How do you prosecute the Devil?

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